THRONELESS

TAHTSIZLAR

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(TAHTSIZLAR)

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To those who build thrones beyond the sky,
to those who raise their voices from beneath the earth,
and to those still searching for their identity…

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PROLOGUE (OVERALL STORY)

The Ones Above

Humanity never truly knew what lay beyond the sky.
When they lifted their eyes upward, all they saw were stars: distant, silent, and unreachable. Some believed they were the souls of the dead; others, the architects of the universe. Still others insisted that the stars were nothing more than fire, and that beyond the sky there was only endless emptiness.
They were all wrong.

Beyond the sky existed a vertical order, and at the peak of that order lived a community beyond humanity's comprehension. People gave them a single name: Gods.
That was never their true name. It never had been. Yet humankind needed to attach a divine label to anything that surpassed its own power in order to make sense of it.

They were gods because they looked down upon the world from above. They were gods because, when they wished, they could topple kingdoms and end wars with a single command, and because they lived lives that brushed against immortality. Because their births, their deaths, and their dwelling places were all secrets… The only thing people knew was that they were above.

The Ones Above never corrected this name. To be a god in the eyes of a mortal was useful; for the fear of the divine made questioning impossible.

This order lasted for centuries. Until those who saw the shadow in the sky not as a privilege, but as the world's greatest shackle, finally appeared. Those who wished to destroy this divine threat hanging over kings, armies, and nations organized themselves in secret. Their purpose was singular: to overthrow the Upper Class, bring them down, and for the first time place humanity's fate back into the hands of humans.

This was not merely two armies colliding head-on. It was a shadow war ruled by betrayals, spies, bloody reckonings, and secrets. The Upper Class was fracturing from within, while the Resistance held itself together through a fragile alliance of groups driven by freedom, vengeance, and destruction.

And right in the middle of this chaos, one member of the Upper Class descended to the world.

At first there was no grand purpose; they had simply grown weary of the monotony of their high world and become curious about the life below. Yet the moment their foot touched the earth, they found themselves at the very heart of the Resistance. Those facing them were no ordinary rebels; they were highly trained, dangerous, and determined people. Knowing they would be killed the instant their true identity was revealed, this member of the Upper Class clung to a single option: to lie and infiltrate their ranks.

Thus began a dangerous game caught between two worlds.

On one side, a spy infiltrating their own race; on the other, an ally helping the humans who had sworn to overthrow that race… The lies told for survival gradually became the truth itself. As they witnessed why the Resistance fighters struggled and what they had lost, they began to question everything their own people had accepted as right. Yet no matter what they did, they could not reject the blood flowing in their veins or the world in which they had been raised.

Neither side knew who they truly were. One regarded them as a companion of destiny; the other as a part of their own race. In reality, they were the only person standing inside both fronts at once.

This story is not merely a war between two different kinds; it is the inner ruin of a spy trying to discover who is right. What one side calls freedom may be the other side's apocalypse. The beings one side calls gods may turn out to be nothing more than cowards trying to preserve their own order.

A descent that began with curiosity will end at the center of a great war against their own people. And at the end of the day, only one question will remain as the sole truth: In war, is the hardest thing defeating your enemy… or understanding who your enemy truly is?

Chapter 1: The Meeting

The inside of the cellar was dim, as always. The flickering light of the gas lamp barely illuminated the old newspaper clippings on the walls, the scratched maps, and the stacks of notes piled on top of one another. The table was a mess: ink stains, broken pens, half-finished lists…

Kael was sunk deep into his chair, slowly turning the pages of the newspaper in his hands. He had been after the same work for years—plans, calculations, names… And at last, he was ready to form his team.

Just then, a thin voice rose from the doorway:

“Kael.”

No answer.

“Kael!”

Without even lifting his head, Kael muttered:

“What is it?”

“I’m so bored.”

“That’s not my problem.”

The girl pursed her lips and lightly tapped her staff against the floor. She waited in silence for a while, but her patience quickly ran out:

“KAEL!!”

This time Kael slowly set his pen down on the table.
“Don’t shout. Almost done.”

“You said that two hours ago.”

“It’s still almost done.”

The girl rolled her eyes and walked over to one of the maps on the wall. Kael pushed the newspapers aside and opened the small notebook in front of him. After scribbling a few lines, he closed it and took a deep breath.

“All right. We’re going.”

The girl turned around in surprise.
“What?”

“I said we’re starting.”

“Starting? How many of us even are there?”

Kael stood up and threw his coat over his shoulder.
“Two.”

“Two?”

“Yes. Two.”

The girl paused for a moment. Then a slow smile spread across her face, as if she had been waiting for this moment for years.

The heavy wooden door of the cellar creaked open, and they stepped outside.

Before them stood a city that carried the texture of the Middle Ages. Narrow streets, stone houses, swinging signs, the distant noise of a market… The air was cool and slightly damp; the sky was covered with gray clouds.

They began to walk. The girl followed a little behind, examining everything with curiosity. Kael walked down the middle of the road, carefully scanning the surroundings.

“This place… is a bit chaotic,” the girl said.

Kael glanced over his shoulder.
“You’ll get used to it.”

A few streets later, the girl’s eyes caught a torn poster on a wall. In large letters it read “THE ONES ABOVE”; beneath it was a faded picture and a few warning sentences. She pointed at the poster:

“What does ‘The Ones Above’ mean?”

Kael paused. He fixed his gaze on the poster, then slowly looked away.
“Forget it. You don’t need to know.”

“But—”

“I’ll explain later,” Kael said, gesturing for her to keep walking. “First get to know the city. This is our new playground.”

The girl shrugged but continued to follow him.

As they moved through the streets, Kael began introducing the surroundings:
“The shop on the left… We’ll get our supplies there. It’s expensive, but the quality is good. The inn on the right… Don’t hang around there too much; they ask too many questions. And don’t get close to that tower on the corner. The guards are more tense at night.”

The girl gave short responses from time to time—“Hmm,” “Got it,” “I’m bored.” At one point she greeted a street cat; another time she stared for a long while at the apples in a vendor’s cart.

At one point Kael stopped and turned to Luna:
“What was your name again?”

The girl looked a little surprised:
“Lunais. But just call me Luna.”

“Luna…” Kael nodded. “All right. Luna, from now on you listen to me. Think before you ask questions. And… don’t shout too much.”

Luna stuck out her tongue:
“I can’t promise that.”

Kael sighed, but the corner of his mouth curved slightly upward.

Two people.

They had come out of a cellar.
And the city was not yet aware of what was about to happen to it.

Kael walked in silence for a while longer. Luna examined every corner, occasionally dragging her feet and murmuring, “Is there still more?”

“We’re going to the guild,” Kael said at last.

“The guild? What guild?”

“The place where we’ll take jobs. The place where people know us—or at least will know us.”

Luna raised her eyebrows:
“With a two-person team?”

“For now.”

“For now…” Luna rested her staff on her shoulder. “I hope they sell something inside. I’m hungry.”

Kael answered without looking at her:
“We’re not going there to eat.”

“But I’m hungry.”

“Later.”

“You always say ‘later.’”

Kael took a deep breath but said nothing. After a few more streets they stopped in front of a large stone building. An old sign hung above the door: **Shadow Guild**. The door was half open; a faint noise and voices drifted out from inside.

Kael stepped in, and Luna followed.

The hall was quite spacious. Various armed people sat around the long table in the center. Some were playing cards, some studying maps, a few looking at the notice board on the wall. Behind the counter, a middle-aged, bearded man lowered his glasses to the tip of his nose.

“New faces,” the man said in a tired voice. “What are you looking for?”

Kael stepped forward:
“We want to register.”

The man raised his eyebrows:
“Just the two of you?”

“Yes.”

Luna raised her hand:
“I’m Luna. This is Kael. He’s a bit surly, but he’s not bad.”

Kael narrowed his eyes at Luna:
“Shut up.”

The man smiled:
“I’ve taken your names. What kind of work are you looking for?”

Kael kept it short:
“Any kind. But we prefer the quiet ones.”

The man opened his ledger and scribbled something:
“Understood. There’s a membership fee. And before you take your first job, a small… evaluation.”

Luna immediately cut in:
“Evaluation? Written or oral? Because I don’t like written ones.”

The man looked surprised:
“No, practical. A small trial mission.”

“Oh, then that’s fine.” Luna shrugged. “But can we eat something first? I’m really hungry.”

Kael brought his hand to his forehead:
“Luna.”

“What? I’m saying we’re hungry.”

The man laughed:
“There’s a kitchen in the back. We can bring out bread and soup. Not free, though.”

Luna immediately turned to Kael:
“See? He’s talking like a normal person.”

Kael sighed:
“Two portions. On me.”

The man nodded and called toward the back:
“Two soups!”

Luna leaned against the counter and looked at Kael with a satisfied expression:
“See? Even the guild has food. Why were you making me eat dry bread in the cellar?”

“We were working.”

“You were working. I was bored.”

Kael didn’t answer. The man made a few more notes in the ledger, then held out a paper:
“Your names are here. Come back tomorrow morning. I’ll give you your first trial mission. I hope you both survive.”

Luna took the paper and examined it:
“Survive? Are these jobs that hard?”

The man shrugged:
“Sometimes. Especially the ones related to ‘The Ones Above.’”

Kael’s shoulders tensed for a moment. Luna noticed but didn’t ask; she only glanced sideways at him.

A little later two bowls of hot soup arrived. Luna immediately grabbed her spoon:
“Ooh, it’s good! Kael, you eat too. So your face doesn’t get even more sour.”

Kael sat at the table and began slowly drinking his soup. Luna kept talking:

“So how many people are in this guild?
Are they all quiet like you?
Or are there fun ones among them too?
Like that long-haired guy in the corner… What does he do?”

Kael set his spoon down on the table:
“Luna.”

“Yes?”

“Drink your soup. You can talk later.”

Luna stuck out her tongue but returned to her soup. After a few sips she couldn’t hold back again:

“Still… We registered as two people. Isn’t that a bit few?”

This time Kael looked directly at her. A faint spark flickered in his eyes:
“Two for now. It’ll grow later.”

“I hope so,” Luna said with a smile. “Otherwise we’ll just keep reading newspapers in the cellar with you. And that’s not fun at all.”

Kael didn’t answer, but this time he didn’t object either.

As the noise of the guild surrounded them, they had taken their first steps.

…

“Your first trial mission. Simple. If you fail, your membership is cancelled. If you succeed… you continue.”

Kael opened the envelope and read the paper inside. Luna immediately leaned over:

“What does it say? What does it say?”

Kael folded the paper:
“There are three people in an old warehouse. They’re holding a stolen ledger. We’ll bring the ledger back. Quietly. Prefer no one gets hurt.”

Luna raised her eyebrows:
“So we’re not going to fight?”

“If possible, no.”

“Boring.”

“Surviving isn’t boring.”

When they left the guild, the sun had already begun to set; the streets were gradually growing dim. Kael walked in silence for a few streets. Then he suddenly stopped and turned to Luna:

“Listen. You’re going to learn how to make a strategy.”

Luna rested her staff on her shoulder:
“All right then, teacher.”

Kael pointed with his finger at the ruin across the street. A three-story, half-collapsed old warehouse with boards nailed over the windows… A faint light was leaking from inside.

“There are three people. One is keeping watch on the top floor, two are downstairs. The ledger is most likely on the table on the lower floor. The front door isn’t locked, but it creaks. There’s a broken window at the back.”

Luna narrowed her eyes:
“How do you know?”

“I counted while we were walking. You should have looked too.”

“I was thinking about the soup.”

Kael ignored the answer and continued:
“Here’s the plan: You’ll create a distraction, I’ll go in and take the ledger. Then you’ll get me out. Total time… four minutes at most.”

Luna raised her hand:
“One second. I’m creating the distraction? How?”

Kael pulled a small, round metal piece from his pocket:
“Throw this at the edge of the roof so it makes a noise. While the lookout looks that way, I’ll enter through the back window. When the ones downstairs focus upward, I’ll take the ledger. Meanwhile you’ll approach the front door and shout ‘Help! There’s a thief!’ to create panic. While they rush outside, I’ll exit through the side door, and you’ll run with me.”

Luna thought:
“So… I’m just going to shout?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll finish the job quietly?”

“Yes.”

“That’s unfair.”

Kael looked at her:
“You’re more talented at shouting.”

Luna stuck out her tongue but couldn’t stop herself from grinning:
“Fine. On one condition: If we succeed, you’ll buy me dessert.”

“Deal.”

They took their positions at once. Luna slipped into the corner of the street; Kael slid like a shadow beneath the broken window at the back of the warehouse. They exchanged a look. Kael nodded.

Luna weighed the metal piece and threw it.
Clang!

The lookout on the roof started. Heavy footsteps hurried toward the window.

At that exact moment—Kael flowed in through the window. Silent, smooth. He slipped to the lower floor. Two men were playing cards at the table; the ledger they were looking for sat right at the edge. Kael held his breath and reached through the shadows. The moment his fingers touched the leather—

Chaos erupted outside. Luna shouted with all the strength her lungs allowed:

“HELP! THERE’S A THIEF! FIRE! RUN!!”

The men overturned their chairs and jumped up:
“What the hell is going on?!”

The lookout upstairs was coming down the stairs three at a time:
“There’s someone downstairs!”

Kael snatched the ledger and threw himself against the side door. The door opened; on his first step outside, Luna was already beside him. The two of them dove into the narrow alley and vanished from sight.

Shouts exploded behind them:
“Who was that?!”
“The ledger! The ledger’s gone!”
“Catch them!”

But the pair had already shot three streets away. Luna burst into laughter as she ran:
“Did you see that? How I threw everything into chaos!”

Kael tucked the ledger into the breast of his coat:
“You could have shouted a little less.”

“But it worked!”

“It worked.”

When they stopped in a dim alcove, both were out of breath. Kael pulled out the ledger and quickly scanned the pages; it was complete. Luna had her hands on her knees, looking at him with a huge victorious grin:

“First mission… done?”

Kael nodded:
“Done.”

“And I was amazing.”

“You managed.”

Luna punched him lightly on the shoulder:
“Come on! Admit it, I was amazing.”

Kael paused. He couldn’t hide the slight curve that appeared on his lips:
“…You did a good job.”

Luna raised her fingers in victory:
“Don’t forget my dessert. You promised.”

Kael put the ledger away and continued walking without breaking his pace:
“We’re going back to the guild. Delivery first. Then dessert.”

Luna fell in behind him:
“Kael?”

“What?”

“Next time let me go inside too. Shouting was good, but… I need a little more action.”

Kael looked over his shoulder:
“Strategy first, action later.”

“Always ‘later’…”

“You’ll get used to it.”

The two shadows melted into the night and disappeared through the dim streets. The shouts they left behind were already far away.

The first mission was complete.
And the two strangers now felt a little more like a “team.”

The Next Day

Before the first light of morning had fully fallen on the streets, Kael and Luna were once again at the door of the Shadow Guild.

Luna was yawning; Kael, as always, kept his silence.

When they entered, the bearded man behind the counter raised his eyebrows at the sight of them:
“You brought the ledger yesterday. Clean work. Today there’s something heavier. Want it?”

Kael nodded:
“Give it.”

The man held out a thick envelope. Kael opened the paper and scanned it quickly. Luna immediately leaned on his shoulder:
“What? What does it say?”

Kael’s voice was lower than usual as he folded the paper:
“An abandoned weaving workshop on the eastern edge of the city. There’s a group collecting illegal magic materials inside. Among them is a rare crystal fragment. The guild wants that crystal.”

He paused for a moment:
“No taking anyone alive—just the crystal. But we have to be careful; the ones on the other side aren’t ordinary thieves this time.”

Luna twirled her staff between her fingers:

“So we can fight?”

“If possible, still no.”

“Always the same line…”

Kael tucked the envelope into his pocket:
“We’ll talk about the plan on the way.”

The workshop was on the most desolate edge of the city. An old building surrounded by high walls, its roof collapsed in places, boards nailed over the windows… A faint blue light leaked from inside.

When they crouched in the shadow of the wall, Kael quickly drew a sketch in the dirt with his finger:
“There are three entrances: the main door, the side storage door, and the hole in the roof. At least six people are waiting inside; two of them are mages. The crystal is most likely in the middle hall, in a protected chest.”

Luna listened carefully.

“You’ll go up to the roof, I’ll enter through the side door. You’ll make noise from above to create a distraction, I’ll reach the chest and take the crystal. Five minutes at most.”

Luna looked at the sketch:
“Yesterday you said ‘four minutes.’”

“They’re more crowded this time.”

“Got it.” Luna threw her staff over her shoulder: “Should I shout again?”

“No. This time roll a stone or break something. Just draw their attention upward.”

They both took position.

Kael slowly lifted the latch of the side door. Inside was pitch black; only the light from the blue crystal danced on the walls. Four men stood around the iron chest in the center; just behind them, two robed mages with magical rings flickering in their hands.

The plan was about to work perfectly… until the stone Luna threw hit a rotten beam on the roof.

Crack!

The beam broke, and a massive piece of wood crashed downward. But it wasn’t only the wood that fell; Luna tumbled to the ground with a loud noise.

“Ah—!”

Her staff flew from her hand. Every eye turned to her at once. The plan exploded in that second.

One of the robed mages raised his hand; a blue ring appeared and pinned Luna to the floor. The others drew their swords as Kael burst from the shadows. He quickly took down two men, but a magic blast to the chest sent him slamming into the wall.

His breath was cut short.

Luna was writhing on the ground:
“Kael—! The plan… The plan—”

“Quiet…” Kael tried to stand, but his voice came out as a rasp.

The men bound them both within seconds and fixed them to the chairs beside the crystal. The rough ropes cut into their wrists.

The robed man leaned in and grinned at Kael’s face:
“Guild dogs… You went too far this time.”

The other picked up Luna’s staff from the ground and turned it in his hand:
“Little girl… You like to shout, don’t you? You’ll be shouting a lot more soon.”

Kael struggled against the ropes, but the magic seemed to have paralyzed his body. Luna’s eyes were wide with fear.

The men were in no hurry. They thrust an iron rod into the fire; the smell of heated metal spread through the room. The robed one smiled:

“Let’s start with the girl. Maybe she’ll talk. Otherwise it’ll be your turn.”

Luna’s breath was catching:
“Kael…”

Her voice trembled:
“I’m sorry. The stone… went wrong.”

Kael lifted his head. His eyes were pitch black:
“My fault. The plan… was incomplete.”

As the heated iron rod approached Luna, the girl squeezed her eyes shut tightly.

At that exact moment—the air suddenly changed.

One of the windows exploded with a tremendous noise; glass rained inward. Under the blue light a silhouette appeared and paused for a moment: a deer skull mask on their face,

blue-stoned earrings dangling from the tips of long black antlers… As the cloak over their dark blue armor billowed, curved, glowing swords shone in both hands.

They said nothing. They simply walked.

The first mage launched a ring, but the masked warrior split the magic in two with a single stroke of their sword. When the second sword swung, the mage was already crumpled on the ground.

The others charged with shouts. The warrior kept their movements to a minimum: one step, one turn, and the deadly harmony of the two swords… Short and precise. Five men were laid out in less than thirty seconds.

They threw a sword at the last one who tried to flee, pinning him to the wall by the shoulder.

The room sank back into a heavy silence. The warrior slowly turned and cut Kael and Luna's ropes with the tip of their sword. As Kael tried to stand on trembling legs, the masked warrior walked to the chest, took the blue crystal, and placed it in Kael's palm.

Kael looked at the crystal in his hand, then at the empty black eye sockets behind the mask. A sudden feeling flashed inside him: this person was needed for the team. Exactly someone like this.

"Thank—" The word caught in his throat, but Kael quickly recovered: "Come with us. We have a two-person team. You'll be the third."

The warrior looked at him in silence for a while. Finally they spoke in a low, rough voice:
"I was here for the Bonebreakers. I have no business with anyone outside of them. Including you."

They pulled their sword from the wall and hung it over their shoulder. Just as silently as they had come, they exited through the window and vanished into the night. Behind them remained broken glass, aching bodies, and a heavy silence.

Luna whispered in a trembling voice:
"Who… was that?"

Kael tightly gripped the crystal:
"I don't know."

When they returned to the Shadow Guild, the man behind the counter jumped to his feet at the sight of them:
"What happened to you?!"

Kael placed the crystal on the counter:
"Mission complete. The crystal's here." He shot a brief glance at Luna: "And we… almost weren't."

The man asked no further questions and held out the reward. Kael took the money and immediately grabbed Luna by the arm:
“We’re leaving.”

…

The masked warrior’s cloak billowed in the wind as they ran across the city’s rooftops.

If the Bonebreakers hadn’t been involved, they wouldn’t have even set foot there; the smugglers had stolen a sacred crystal belonging to them, and they had simply taken their property back. Those two guild members had just been the wrong people at the wrong time.

Still… the terror in that girl’s eyes and the gaze of that red-haired young man who was still trying to make a plan even while bound wouldn’t leave their mind. Especially the offer made without the slightest hesitation the moment the crystal was taken: *“Come with us.”*

They sat on the edge of a roof and watched the city. Toward dawn, while passing a wounded street child, they paused; they quietly left the last piece of bread from their pocket beside the child and continued on their way.

A few streets away, a notice on the outer board of the Shadow Guild caught their eye. It was a notice about innocent people waiting for help. The warrior looked at the paper for a long time, then tore it off with a single motion and put it in their pocket.

…

As dawn broke, they stepped through the door of the guild.

When Kael and Luna arrived at the guild the next day, they saw the silhouette standing beside the counter. Cloak on the shoulder, swords at the waist, deer skull on the face…

Luna’s breath caught:
“That’s…”

The masked warrior turned to the two of them. Their voice was a little clearer this time:
“I thought about it. My being there that night wasn’t about you—it was about the Bonebreakers. But you were there too… and you’re still standing.”

Kael took a step forward:
“My offer still stands.”

The warrior tilted their head slightly:
“No name. I’ll just walk with you for a while, then decide.”

Luna immediately jumped in:
“I’m Luna! This is Kael. So what should we call you?”

The warrior paused for a moment, then lightly raised their antlers:

“If you want… call me Deer. For now that’s enough.”

Luna grinned:
“At least we’re three people now. Maybe next time I won’t fall off the roof!”

Deer’s sword lightly clinked in its scabbard—as if accepting the joke.

Kael pulled out his small notebook. Directly beneath the two names he carved a new one:
Deer.

Chapter 2: Preparation Once More

The sun was just rising behind the walls. The streets were still empty, and the air was filled with a sharpness that burned the lungs.

Luna was leaning against a stone wall, arms crossed. Her eyes were watering from yawning:
“Even the merchants haven’t woken up yet, Kael. The sun itself isn’t fully awake.”

Kael pulled the coins from his pocket and counted them. His gaze remained serious:
“Deer is staying at the guild, checking the job notices. We need to prepare. Last night in that workshop we nearly died, Luna. Luck won’t always be on our side.”

“It wasn’t luck, it was skill.”

“You fell off the roof.”

Luna rolled her eyes:
“That’s called a gravity assassination. Anyway, what are we buying?”

“Everything we need.”

When they reached the market square, the shop shutters were just beginning to creak open. Their first stop was a small armorer where the smells of iron and leather mixed together. The burly man behind the counter set aside a massive hammer.

“You’re early,” he said in a sleepy voice. “What do you need?”

Kael placed a few silver coins on the table:
“Light but sturdy leather protection. The kind that won’t restrict movement.”

The blacksmith looked at the coins, then eyed Luna:
“For this little girl? If you put armor on her she’ll collapse under the weight.”

Luna furrowed her brows:
“Hey! I fell off a roof and still survived, mister!”

Kael stepped in:
“Give her a breastplate and bracers. And those steel-reinforced gloves for me.”

The blacksmith grumbled and went into the back room. A few minutes later he returned and placed the dark leather armor pieces on the counter. Luna tried the bracers on her arms.

“Hmm… Not bad. I feel more dangerous.”

“You’re not yet,” Kael said as he put on the gloves. “You’ll just be harder to kill.”

After leaving the armorer they headed to the apothecary at the end of the street. Inside smelled of dried herbs, potions, and glass bottles. An old woman looked at them over her glasses.

“Blood-stopper or poison, my children?”

Kael took out two gold coins:
“Three healing potions, and two smoke bomb casings to block vision.”

Luna turned to Kael in surprise:
“Smoke bombs? Since when are we chemists?”

“It’s definitely more effective than raising your voice when we need to escape.”

The woman wrapped the potion bottles in small cloths and handed them over:
“Be careful. The roads outside the city have been unsafe lately. Even those in the sky aren’t looking this way anymore.”

Kael paused for a moment at the woman’s words but gave no reply. He placed the potions in his bag.

When they stepped outside the market had come alive. The smell of warm bread drifted from the bakeries. Luna’s stomach growled.

“Kael.”

“No.”

“I haven’t even said what I was going to say!”

“You’re going to say you’re hungry.”

“But I really am hungry! Look, those pastries on that stall smell amazing.”

Kael took a deep breath. He pulled a few copper coins from his pocket and held them out to the old baker. The man wrapped two warm rolls in paper and handed them over:
“Fresh out of the oven, kids. Enjoy.”

Luna grabbed the roll and took a huge bite:
“Now we’re a stronger team.”

Kael tore off a small piece of his own roll and kept walking:
“Gear’s done. Stomach’s full. Now we’re heading out to the path outside the city.”

Luna asked with her mouth full:
“Outside the city? What’s out there?”

“Practice. We need to find our rhythm before Deer joins us. You won’t fall off roofs, and I won’t have to watch my back.”

When they reached the gate in the walls the guards blocked the way with their spears:
“Merchants or adventurers?”

Kael showed the guild badge:
“Shadow Guild. Patrol.”

The guard nodded and stepped aside:
“Stay away from the forest edge. Strange sounds were coming from there this morning.”

Luna rested her staff on her shoulder and smiled:
“No problem, sir. I’ve got a planning genius walking beside me.”

Kael whispered as they passed through the gate:
“You know plans fall apart at the first scream, right?”

“I won’t shout this time. Promise.”

They began walking along the path. As the noise of the city faded behind them, the coolness of the greenery struck their faces.

After a while Luna looked at Kael:

“Kael?”

“What?”

“Deer… Do you think he’ll really come with us?”

Kael answered without slowing his steps:
“He tore down the notice. He just needs time.”

“And what about you?”

“Me?”

“What do you need?”

Kael stopped. He turned and looked back at the city, at the gray sky beyond the walls.

“More power. And people who won’t fall while standing beside me.”

Luna grinned and clacked her armored bracers together:
“Then you’re lucky. I won’t fall so easily anymore.”

Kael smiled faintly over his shoulder:
“We’ll see. Take out your staff.”

Luna planted her staff on the ground and tried to produce a faint beam of light, but the magic scattered into the air before it could even form.

“Ugh, it didn’t work again,” Luna muttered, dropping her arms in defeat. “I can’t focus at all.”

Kael tightened the strap of his new glove and took a step forward. There was an impatient yet instructional tone in his voice:
“Because you’re putting your weight wrong. If you don’t plant your balance on your back foot, you’ll leave yourself open before you finish the move.”

Luna rolled her eyes:
“Look who’s talking. Like your moves are so fast that you’re giving me lessons.”

Just then a light, rhythmic cracking sound came from the bushes. A few branches were pushed aside and a young man stepped onto the path.

His upper body was completely bare; with his wide trousers, the curved sword at his waist, and his cream-colored turban, he looked as if he didn’t belong to this region. He tightened the black bandages around his wrists and looked directly at the two of them.

Luna lowered her staff and looked the man up and down:
“Were you watching us just now?”

The stranger paused. His voice was quite calm:
“I didn’t want to interrupt. It’s just… your stances looked a bit too flawed.”

Kael’s hand went reflexively to the hilt of his knife. He didn’t take his eyes off the sword at the man’s waist:
“Who are you, friend? What’s going on?”

The young man shook his head slightly from side to side:
“I have no bad intentions. I was just passing by, and when I saw your stances I couldn’t help myself.”

Luna furrowed her brows:
“Our stances? And what’s with walking around shirtless in this cold? Don’t you get cold at all?”

The stranger pursed his lips and smiled faintly:
“Cold starts in the mind. Anyway… You’re training each other, I assume, but your foundation is pretty weak.”

Kael spread his stance and raised his guard:
“Weak, you say? Then come show us the right way.”

The young man didn’t even touch his sword. He simply tilted his body slightly to the side:
“Both of you come at once. Let’s see.”

Luna immediately hid behind Kael:
“Kael, this kid is asking for it. Teach him a lesson.”

“Don’t talk so much, Luna. Move to my left.”

Kael suddenly lunged forward and swung his sword hard. But the stranger, without even drawing his sword from its scabbard, slipped past the strike with a tiny body feint. Before Kael could make a second move, the man lightly tapped Kael’s wrist with the scabbard of his sword.

Kael’s hand went numb; his balance was shaken.

Luna seized the opportunity and attacked from behind; she struck her staff against the ground and tried to create a wave of wind:
“Take this!”

But before even the wind could form, the stranger had already moved behind Luna. He lightly tapped the girl’s shoulder with his hand:
“If you leave your back open like that, you won’t have time to finish that spell, little girl.”

Luna jumped and spun around, her eyes wide as saucers:
“Fast… So fast!”

Kael lowered his sword, out of breath:
“You didn’t even draw your sword from its scabbard…”

The stranger relaxed his stance into a more casual position and adjusted the edge of his turban:
“A sword is drawn to kill. We’re just talking here, not fighting.”

Luna pointed at the man with her finger and turned to Kael:
“Kael… The guy just completely wiped the floor with us.”

Kael brushed himself off and looked at the stranger. The suspicion inside him had given way to deep respect:
“Only royal guards or eastern clans move like that. What’s your name?”

The young man adjusted the scabbard of his sword. There was a distant yet strong expression in his eyes:
“Razen. Razen Takayukinobu.”

Kael repeated the name once in his mind. Luna whistled in surprise:
“Razen Takayukinobu? Look at that name—even the surname is cool.”

Razen tilted his head slightly:
“I need to continue on my way. But keep this in mind: a bad stance kills faster than the sharpest sword.”

Without another word he walked calmly into the forest the way he had come and disappeared among the trees.

Luna stared after the departing man:
“Incredible… He just vanished like he teleported. Kael, that guy is like an army all by himself!”

Kael didn’t answer for a while. Then he pulled out his small notebook and opened a page. They hadn’t invited Razen to the team; they didn’t even know where he was going. But Kael knew very well that a man like this would cross their path again in this city.

In the empty space at the bottom of the notebook he wrote, for now only as a note:
Razen Takayukinobu.

When the sun began to sink from its peak and the coolness of the air made itself felt, Kael and Luna left the forest path behind and returned inside the walls. Both of their legs were aching; the exhaustion of the day was felt with every step.

They came to the front of an old inn on the corner of the street, its wooden sign creaking in the wind. On the sign was a faded picture of a torch. The murmur and the smell of hot food from inside carried out into the street.

Kael pushed open the heavy door and went inside. Luna slipped in right behind him.

It was a place with weak lighting, shadowy corners, but quite warm inside. Kael walked toward a secluded wooden table at the far end, away from the noise of the hall. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

Luna practically collapsed into the chair opposite him:
“I’m dead. I swear I can’t feel my feet.”

The innkeeper’s daughter soon approached the table. Kael placed two silver coins on the table:
“Two portions of hot meat stew, some fresh bread, and foamy barley drink.”

The girl took the money, nodded, and left.

Luna rested her arms on the table and cupped her chin in her hands. Her eyes were slightly narrowed:
“Kael… You seem to know this place well. How do you know this inn?”

Kael leaned his back against the wooden wall. His gaze drifted to the flickering flame of the candle on the table. He was silent for a while, then let out a deep breath:
“Years ago… When I was still alone, I used to stay at this inn. It was the cheapest place in the city, and the only one where no one asked anyone any questions.”

“When you say no one asked questions?”

Kael smiled faintly, but it was a bitter smile:
“When you have no family, when you don’t have five coins in your pocket, and when you’re trying to survive on the streets, people not asking you questions is the greatest luxury, Luna. You don’t know how many nights I slept hungry at this table, how many nights I listened to the footsteps of the patrols outside.”

Luna looked at Kael in surprise. It was the first time she had seen him speak so openly:
“Didn’t you have anyone at all? Your family… or relatives?”

“No,” Kael said in a flat voice. “My father died of Spotted Fever when I was very young. My mother went to work as a palace servant in one of those Upper Class mansions when I was twelve and never came back. Whether it was an experiment by the mages or the whim of some noble, I don’t know. One day she simply disappeared.”

Luna fell silent and looked at the dark expression in Kael’s eyes. She couldn’t find any words to say.

Just then the innkeeper’s daughter set two steaming bowls of stew and warm bread on the table. Kael took a piece of bread and dipped it into the broth of the stew.

“And what about you?” Kael said after chewing his bite, fixing his eyes on Luna. “You have a staff, you try to do magic, but you have neither an academy background nor proper training. Where did you come from, Luna?”

Luna slowly swallowed her bite. She began stirring her bowl with her spoon. For a moment her usual cheerful demeanor gave way to a deep silence:
“I… grew up in the Orphanage on the west side of the city.”

Kael raised his eyebrows slightly but didn’t interrupt.

“Since I was little there was something strange inside me,” Luna continued, her voice trembling slightly. “Sometimes when I got angry the candles around me would suddenly go out; sometimes when I was scared things would shake. The nuns at the orphanage started to fear me. They called me ‘cursed.’”

Luna let out a deep sigh and let her eyes wander over the wood patterns of the table:
“When I turned sixteen they no longer allowed me to stay there. One night they put my things outside the door and shut it in my face. The first night I spent on the street, I found an old, broken staff in the garbage. Maybe it was just a piece of wood, but I clung to it. No one taught me, Kael. I tried everything on my own. Sometimes I blew things up, sometimes I failed, but that staff became my only friend.”

Kael listened to Luna in silence. For the first time he understood so clearly that behind the girl’s overly cheerful, constantly talking, and disobedient nature lay a deep loneliness.

“So that’s why you didn’t hesitate for a moment when you came to the cellar,” Kael said in a low voice.

Luna lifted her head and smiled. This time her smile wasn’t forced; it was warm:
“Yes. You were sitting alone at that table looking at papers. Your brows were furrowed, but there was no hatred in your eyes. Only a purpose. And I… for the first time in my life I wanted to cling to a purpose, Kael.”

Kael took a large sip of his drink. The coolness that burned his throat felt good:
“Changing the world isn’t easy, Luna. The Ones Above… the order they built crushes everyone. The same system that condemned your mother to the orphanage is the one that stole my mother from me.”

“I know,” Luna said. She set her spoon on the table. “But we’re not alone anymore. There’s Deer… that sword master, Razen. And most importantly… there’s us.”

Kael finished the last piece of meat on his plate. He leaned back in his chair and looked at Luna. The candlelight in the middle of the table half-illuminated both of their faces.

“Yes,” Kael said, his voice softening. “We’re no longer just two people.”

Luna raised her glass with a huge smile:
“Then… to the partnership of a street thief and a so-called cursed mage!”

Kael lightly tapped his glass against Luna’s. A solid wooden sound spread across the table:
“Let’s say to becoming a team that does its job properly.”

As they both sipped their drinks, the noise inside the inn continued. But at that small secluded table, the bitter stories of two different lives had completely intertwined.

Kael pushed his plate a little aside and rested his arms on the table. The soft expression on his face suddenly gave way to a dark, sharp seriousness. The candlelight created a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“Luna,” he said in a voice barely above a whisper. “People don’t even know what they believe in. They look up at the sky and pray; even kings mention their names when making decisions. Everyone thinks they’re gods.”

Luna stopped turning her glass in her hand; the seriousness in Kael’s eyes instantly pulled her into a smooth state of attention:
“Everyone says that, Kael. Isn’t that what we’ve been taught since childhood?”

“A lie,” Kael said, almost spitting the word. “Humankind is inclined to call anything stronger than itself, anything it can’t comprehend, a god. But they’re not gods at all, Luna. They’re just an Upper Class that lives above, with a biology and technology different from ours.”

Luna’s brows furrowed; she leaned a little closer to the table:
“What do you mean? Their magic, the way they live as if immortal… the way they topple kingdoms with a single command?”

“It’s all just power,” Kael said, striking the table with his hand. “For years I researched this in these cellars, in the ruins of old libraries, in forgotten parchments. Hundreds of years ago, during that great Age of War, the world was completely different. While humans were tearing each other apart, they came from beyond the sky. They presented themselves as creators because that was the easiest way to control the masses.”

Kael took a deep breath and leaned back against the wooden wall behind him:
“The reason they ended the wars wasn’t love of peace; they didn’t want their slaves to disappear. They left us just enough magic power so we would devour each other but never reach their level. It’s easy for people to bow to things whose birth and death they don’t understand. They used that ignorance.”

Luna swallowed. The usual childish cheer in her voice had completely vanished:
“So what’s your plan, Kael? You’ve learned all this—what are you going to do?”

Kael pulled out the small notebook on the table and pressed his finger against the old symbol on its cover:
“We’re going to bring them down, Luna. From their thrones. We’re going to tear that false god mask from their faces. For the first time in hundreds of years, we’re going to place humanity’s fate back into the hands of humans. For that, guilds, gangs, and shadows aren’t enough. We need an organized rebellion, a strong group, and most importantly a mind that can unravel the secrets of the Ones Above.”

Luna looked at Kael's determined face for a while. The noise in the room seemed to fade for a moment; all that remained was the weight of the enormous dream Kael had built.

Luna placed her staff on the table, right next to Kael's notebook. For the first time an expression that was not childish, but extremely mature and unshakable, appeared on her face:

"I'm in, Kael."

Kael looked at her in surprise:
"Luna, this isn't an ordinary guild mission. There's no joke here. We're declaring war directly on the power that rules the world. It could end in death."

Luna smiled faintly; her eyes sparkled:
"I was already dead the day they put me outside the orphanage door, Kael. You took me into that cellar and gave me a purpose. If we're going to tear down the order of these false gods… my staff and my life are with you in this cause. Until the end."

Kael saw the unshakable belief in the girl's eyes. A warmth he hadn't felt in a long time spread through his chest.

"All right," Kael said, nodding. "Then our first goal is to prepare everyone in the group for this idea. Deer, Razen… each of them will have a reason to enter this war. But the core is us."

Luna raised her glass; this time her voice was much louder and more determined:
"To the team that will topple the sky!"

Kael struck his glass firmly against hers:
"To the team that will topple the sky."

When they left the inn, the cool, still air of the night struck their faces. The streets of the city had emptied; only the torchlight of a few guards struck the stone walls. Without saying a word they walked side by side. Inside them was that strange yet peaceful weight of sharing a great secret. When they opened the door of the small house where they would stay and went inside, the exhaustion of the day settled over them.

When the first light of morning filtered through the wooden window, Kael was already awake. He was counting the last remaining coins on the table. He sorted the copper and silver into groups, then let out a deep sigh.

Luna came out of her room rubbing her eyes:
"Good morning… You're frowning at those coins again."

Kael lifted his head:
"Because our money is almost gone. Armor, potions… we've hit the bottom of the cash box. I know you'll get mad if I ask, but… Luna, do you have any cooking skills at all? We're going broke eating out."

Luna paused. A sheepish yet equally shameless expression appeared on her face:
“Well… I’m something of an expert at burning ingredients. I’ve blown up an oven while doing magic before—does that count?”

Kael put his hand to his forehead:
“Got it. We’ll be stuck with the guild’s cheap soup again.”

…

When they arrived at the guild it was as crowded as usual. They passed through the murmur and the heavy smell of alcohol and headed toward their usual quiet corner. The masked warrior Deer was there. He was sitting alone at a wooden table in the corner, checking the sharpness of his sword with a small whetstone in his hand.

Kael and Luna approached the table and sat across from him.

Luna immediately jumped in:
“You’re early, I see. Did you come before sunrise again?”

The warrior didn’t lift his head; he just continued running the whetstone along the blade:
“I didn’t need to sleep.”

Kael rested his arms on the table. He fixed his gaze directly on the black eye sockets of the deer skull mask. The question that had been bothering him since the previous night was in his mind:
“Deer. I want to ask you something. You said it that night in the workshop too… Why are you so full of rage against the Bonebreakers? I can tell they’re not just an ordinary gang to you.”

The hand holding the whetstone suddenly stopped. He slowly lifted his head; his voice was filled with hatred:
“That name you call the Bonebreakers… do you really know what it is? They are the Ones Above themselves. A cheap mask they hide behind.”

Luna leaned forward in surprise:
“What do you mean? Aren’t the Bonebreakers a lower-city gang?”

“No,” the warrior said, his voice trembling with icy fury. “In the past my people lived quietly in the caves deep in the mountains. The Ones Above came to our region. They wanted to crush us, to seize our lands. When we resisted they called us ‘barbarians’ and slaughtered us by breaking the bones of an entire colony.”

The warrior clasped his hands on the table. His bandaged fingers tightened:
“To mock the brutality they inflicted on us, to hide themselves and establish a front organization in the lower city, they gave themselves this name: *Bonebreakers*. Those bastards who present themselves as gods are building a kingdom in the lower city under this disgusting name. It’s a name built on the blood of my people.”

Kael and Luna looked at each other. Kael remembered the conversation he had had at the inn. He leaned a little closer to the table; his voice was extremely determined:
“So your war isn’t just with a few thugs in the city. It’s directly with those false gods.”

The masked warrior looked into Kael’s eyes:
“Until every single one of those sitting on that throne is brought to their knees… my war will not end.”

Luna took a deep breath. She clenched her hand on the table into a tight fist:
“Then you’re in the right place, Deer. Because the people at this table also have a huge unsettled score with the Ones Above.”

Deer’s words had completely changed the atmosphere at the table. Kael took a deep breath and leaned back:
“Then we need to get stronger faster. Training alone isn’t enough; we have to catch the real combat tempo.”

Luna jumped in excitedly:
“There’s going to be a huge fighting tournament in the lower city in two days! There are boxing and sword matches. The winners get both a hefty prize and solid reputation.”

Deer tilted his head slightly:
“Doesn’t matter to me. My swords are ready.”

Kael rested his arms on the table:
“Good. First let’s go register, then we’ll assess the situation.”

…

The three of them left the guild and went straight to the gloomy, noisy arena district of the lower city. There was a long queue in front of the registration tent in the middle of the square. When their turn came, the official at the table asked without even lifting his face:
“Names and type of participation?”

Kael placed two gold coins on the table:
“Three people for boxing and sword matches. From the Shadow Guild.”

The official tossed the coins into the cash box, signed the papers, and handed the three of them their entry seals:
“Be at the arena at dawn in two days. If you’re late, you’re eliminated.”

Having finished the day with the relief of completing registration, the team withdrew to their own places to rest properly.

…

The next day, with the first light of morning, Kael, Luna, and Deer met again at the main building of the Shadow Guild. The activity inside was greater than usual. Just as they were

about to head toward the main hall, the guild master appeared from behind the counter and beckoned them with his hand:
“Kael, Luna… Bring your warrior friend as well. There’s someone who wants a private meeting with you.”

The guild master led them to a special interview room on the upper floor of the building, with a heavy wooden door. Inside was filled with leather-upholstered chairs, massive bookshelves, and a light scent of lavender. Behind the table stood a young woman in a stylish, neatly cut guild uniform.

Aruze was the guild’s Human Resources and Mission Assignment Specialist. She had a serious posture and sharp eyes; but at the same time the curious light in her eyes and the cute smile on her face gave her a very different air.

Aruze placed the parchments in her hands on the table and spoke with an innocent yet attentive smile:
“Welcome. I’m Aruze. I’m in the new member evaluation unit of the Shadow Guild. Your files are in front of me… A red-haired strategist, a novice mage, and a deer-masked sword master. An unusual trio.”

Luna immediately jumped in:
“Actually we’re four people, but the other one likes walking around shirtless!”

Aruze chuckled softly, then let her eyes roam over the three of them:
“Wonderful. So, what’s the story of this team? How did you come together? I’m really curious.”

Kael stepped in and began to explain. Keeping their true purpose regarding the Ones Above and their grand plans secret, he constructed an innocent story:
“Luna and I met on the streets, among the smoke of an old cellar. She was a mage trying to stand on her own but with potential. As for Deer, it was pure coincidence… Our paths crossed in one of the Bonebreakers’ warehouses. Both sides were after the same enemy, and we covered each other’s backs.”

Luna also jumped in and began describing the explosion in the workshop and Deer’s sudden dive through the window with exaggerated flair. Aruze seemed almost enchanted as she listened to Luna’s excited storytelling. She rested her chin on her hand and listened with her eyes wide open.

Aruze smiled cheerfully:
“Incredible! Your story is just like the old tales… I really like this energy and harmony of yours.”

Then Aruze suddenly made her tone serious and leaned toward the table:
“I heard you registered for the tournament yesterday. Before tomorrow’s big competition I have a perfect ‘novice mission’ for you to test yourselves and strengthen your skills.”

Kael raised his eyebrows:

“What kind of mission?”

Aruze pulled a sealed paper from the drawer:
“On the border of the city’s lower sewers, a nest of strange creatures that have been preying on merchants’ goods has been detected. The danger level isn’t high, but it’s perfect for developing the team coordination of novices. Plus the reward is quite generous by guild standards.”

Deer spoke in a low voice:
“Not bad for a warm-up.”

Luna spun her staff in the air:
“We accept! Smashing a few creatures before the tournament will do us good.”

Kael also nodded:
“All right, we’ll take the mission, Aruze.”

Aruze smiled sweetly and held out the parchment to Kael:
“Wonderful! The details are written on the paper. After the mission you’ll give your report to me personally, agreed?”

After the meeting ended the team left the room. When they stopped at the guild door, evening was approaching.

Kael looked at his companions:
“Before we go to the mission area, everyone finish their preparations. Our warm-up round is starting.”

Deer silently nodded and disappeared into the side streets. Luna and Kael also dispersed toward their own places to prepare for this warm-up mission before the tournament.

Chapter 3: The Rookie Mission

When the heavy iron-grated lid of the sewer creaked open, a sharp, damp, and heavy stench spread inside.

Luna immediately covered her nose with her collar:
“Ugh… Aruze never said this mission would smell ‘lightly.’”

Kael lit the torch he pulled from his pocket with a flint. The blue-yellow flame illuminated the moss-covered stones on the walls:
“You weren’t expecting a clean place in the lower city, were you? Be careful—the ground you’re stepping on is slippery.”

Deer came last. The scabbards of his swords lightly tapped against his hips, and deep breaths could be heard from behind the deer skull mask:
“The smell isn’t the problem. The silence is too much.”

They began walking along the narrow stone path that resembled a trail. A pitch-black pool of water flowed slowly beside them. For the first ten minutes everything went smoothly. Apart from a few large sewer rats, there was no sign of life around.

Luna lightly brightened the tip of her staff and scanned the surroundings:
“Maybe the creatures got scared and ran away? Look, Kael, even my armor looks intimidating, I think.”

Kael paused. He pointed the torch toward the ground:
“Shut up, Luna. Look here.”

On the ground, in the mud, there were huge three-clawed tracks. And the tracks led straight up into the dark ceiling cavity above them.

At that exact moment, the creaking from the ceiling began to increase.

“Above!” Deer shouted.

Three massive, armored creatures dropped down from the ceiling one after another. They were human-sized, their front legs formed of razor-sharp pincers, and their eyes glowed red in the pitch darkness.

Luna instinctively stepped back:
“These aren’t bugs—these are real monsters!”

Kael drew his knife:
“Luna, stay back! Deer, left side is yours!”

Deer lunged forward without a moment’s hesitation. When he swung his twin swords, the sound of metal echoed through the sewer. He severed the first creature’s pincer in a single stroke. The creature let out a piercing scream and retreated.

Kael threw a smoke bomb to the ground. As thick gray smoke filled the area, he blinded one of the creatures, slipped behind it, and stabbed the weak point in its shell.

“It’s working!” Luna shouted, launching a small fireball from behind. The fireball passed through the smoke and struck the creature’s shell, but left only a faint mark.

“Their shells are too thick!” Kael said, out of breath. “Luna, we need something stronger!”

“I tried, but it’s not working!”

Just then, a massive roar from the depths of the ceiling shook the walls. The ceiling suddenly began to crack. It wasn’t a second group of creatures—it was the enormous queen creature, nearly three meters tall with a shell almost as hard as stone, that dropped directly between Kael and Deer!

The impact was so hard that Kael slammed into the wall and rolled to the ground. The torch fell into the water and went out; the place was plunged into pitch darkness. The only light was the weak glow from Luna’s staff.

Deer tried to block the creature's giant pincers with his swords, but the creature's strength was pushing him backward. The stone floor was slipping under his feet.

Luna panicked:
"Kael! Kael, get up!"

Kael tried to rise but groaned from the pain in his ribs:
"Damn it… We walked into a trap."

The queen creature raised its pincers. It was about to come down directly on Kael. Deer was too far to reach him, and Luna's magic wasn't enough to pierce that thick shell.

At that critical moment—

CRAAASH!

The ceiling split with a tremendous noise. Stone fragments and a cloud of dust rained down. A silhouette descended from the top of the sewer like a blue lightning bolt.

The sound of a curved sword being drawn from its scabbard filled the air.

The queen creature's massive pincer, still raised in the air, was severed from its body by a single sharp wave of air and fell with a thud into the mud. The creature let out an ear-splitting scream.

When the dust cloud cleared, they saw the person standing on the creature's back.

Bare upper body, turbaned, curved sword at his waist… Razen Takayukinobu.

Razen swung his sword in a single circular motion and flicked the green creature blood onto the ground. There was not the slightest panic or fatigue in his eyes. His voice echoed calmly yet deeply:
"I heard this noise coming from underground two streets away. Your balance is still very poor."

Luna stared with her mouth open:
"Razen?! Did you… break through the ceiling to get here?!"

Kael pulled himself up using the wall. He tried to hide his surprise as he spoke:
"You arrived just in time, master."

The queen creature lunged toward Razen with its remaining pincer, bellowing. Razen lightly rotated the hilt of his sword. His steps were so light it was as if he were walking on air rather than muddy water. He slipped past the creature's attack and swung his sword in a single line.

HISSS!

The queen creature's massive head separated from its body and rolled to the ground. The giant body collapsed into the mud with a thud.

Deer lowered his swords and looked at Razen. The two sword masters looked into each other's eyes; a silent moment of mutual respect passed between them.

Deer said in a low voice:
"Clean move."

Razen nodded slightly:
"Your reflexes aren't bad either."

Luna immediately ran to Razen's side:
"You're incredible! But how did you get in like that? You literally demolished the ceiling!"

Razen sheathed his sword. The solid sound of metal echoed through the tunnel:
"There was a ventilation shaft on the street above. I found the weak point and struck it."

Kael hung his last smoke bomb on his belt and looked around. From the depths of the tunnel, the growls and footsteps of smaller creatures could still be heard.

Kael straightened and took his sword in hand again:
"Our work isn't finished yet. The mission includes completely clearing the nest at the end of the tunnel. Razen… Since you've come this far, will you accompany us?"

Razen scanned the dark tunnels around them. Then he turned to Kael:
"I don't want to break the ceiling again to get back up. Besides, these creatures needed to be rooted out. I'll take the lead."

Luna raised her staff and strengthened its light; a huge grin appeared on her face:
"Now this mission is starting to get fun!"

The four of them came side by side and continued walking through the dark water toward the creature nest in the depths of the tunnel.

When the last creature in the depths of the tunnel was laid low by Razen's sword stroke, a heavy silence settled over everything.

Luna collapsed onto a stone, out of breath:
"I think it's over…"

Deer looked at Razen as he sheathed his swords:
"You never make a wasted move."

Razen cleaned his sword:
"Wasting power is a waste of time."

Kael cut off a claw from the queen creature on the ground and put it in his bag:

“Good. We’re getting out.”

…

When they left the heavy stench of the sewer behind and stepped back into the streets of the lower city, the coolness of evening struck their faces. They went straight to the Shadow Guild.

They climbed to the upper floor and entered Aruze’s room.

Aruze raised her eyebrows when she saw the four of them:
“So you’ve returned. The smell reached all the way here.”

Luna stepped forward:
“Mission complete! And we found this sword master along the way.”

Kael placed the creature claw on the table. Aruze looked at the evidence, signed the approval paper, and held out a pouch full of gold to Kael:
“Clean work. Congratulations.”

Aruze turned her eyes to Razen:
“And what about you? Will you become an official member of the team?”

Razen touched the hilt of his sword; his voice was extremely distant:
“No. This was only necessary assistance. I’ll continue on my way.”

Without another word, Razen turned his back and left the room.

Luna stared after him:
“There he goes again…”

Kael put the money in his pocket:
“You two go downstairs. I’ll add a few details to the report and come.”

Luna and Deer left the room and headed for the stairs. Kael calmly walked toward the registration desk at the end of the corridor. When he peeked around the corner, he saw Razen quietly handing a form to the official at the counter. The official stamped the paper and put it in the drawer.

Razen was secretly applying for individual registration at the guild.

Kael showed no reaction. With a slight smile on his lips, he withdrew and went down the stairs.

Downstairs, Luna and Deer were waiting for him.

Luna immediately jumped in when she saw Kael:
“So, what do we do now? The mission’s done.”

Kael pulled the tournament seals from his pocket:
“The real work starts now. The tournament is in two days.”

Deer adjusted his mask slightly:
“Boxing and sword matches.”

Luna grinned and clapped her hands excitedly:
“I’m ready. We’re going to tear that arena apart!”

Kael put the seals back in his pocket:
“We have two days. Everyone rest and gather their strength.”

…

The Great Tournament Day

The massive arena was shaking from the early hours of the morning with the cheers and noise of thousands of people. The stone stands were packed; merchants, guild members, and the dangerous types of the lower city filled the area around the muddy field. The field was surrounded by high iron railings and magical protective barriers.

The locker rooms were deep in the corridor. In the gloomy, torch-lit wide stone room the competitors waited in line. No one was speaking to anyone else. Everyone was sharpening their own sword, tightening their bandages. Our team was also in this room, but the rules were clear: There was no group participation; all sixteen fighters would enter the arena alone, under their own names.

Luna stood in a corner, anxiously biting her nails:
“Everyone’s huge… Kael, are you sure this tournament was a good idea?”

Kael was leaning against the wall, trying to look calm:
“The tournament matchups were done by lottery. Until we draw each other, everyone will have to look after themselves.”

Deer had sheathed his swords in the corner and was silently watching the wall. Razen was standing alone at a distant edge of the room corridor, adjusting his turban. Neither of them was acting like part of a team yet.

The announcer waiting in the high tower in the middle of the field made the entire arena ring with the voice connected to the magical orb:

“Ladies and gentlemen! The Lower City Championship begins! A total of eight matchups, sixteen bold fighters! The gates of the field are opening for the first-round matches!”

…

Match 1: Vorak (Iron Fist Guild) vs. Zephyra (Northern Clans)

The announcer shouted enthusiastically:
“First matchup! From the left gate, coming from the Iron Fist Guild, the brute of the southern mines, the massive orc axe master… **Vorak**! And from the right gate, coming from the Northern Clans, a shadow-fast lone assassin… **Zephyra**!”

Round 1
Vorak slammed his massive double-sided axe into the ground, shaking the earth. The spectators exploded with cheers. At the referee’s signal, Vorak charged straight forward; the axe swung through the air like a terrifying bite. Zephyra leaped over the axe in a single jump, drew her two curved daggers in midair, and left two deep scratches on Vorak’s shoulder. The orc bellowed and retreated, but turned with rage and swung again. Zephyra kept her steps light, never approaching the giant man, constantly circling and looking for an opening. The winner of the first round, with her rapid strikes and the first blood drawn, was **Zephyra**.

Round 2
As soon as the second round began, Vorak changed strategy. This time, instead of speeding up, he narrowed the space. The moment Zephyra leaped at him, Vorak threw the axe aside and caught the woman’s wrist in midair with his massive armored hand. He slammed Zephyra hard onto the stone ground. The ground cracked. Although Zephyra tried to get up, Vorak’s heavy, hammer-like descending fist knocked her unconscious.

The announcer shouted:
“An incredible comeback! The winner of the first match, knocking out his opponent in two rounds… **Vorak**!”

…

Match 2: Deer vs. Balthazar (Crimson Swords Guild)

The door of the locker room creaked. An official looked inside and shouted:
“Second match! Deer and Balthazar!”

The announcer adjusted his microphone with a tone of surprise in his voice:
“Ahem… Second matchup! From the Crimson Swords Guild, the undefeated knight of the Western Plains, master of heavy armor… **Balthazar**! And opposite him… Well… On the name paper it only says this… A man with a deer skull on his face… **Deer**? Is that really a name?”

Laughter rose from the stands. Balthazar entered the arena fully equipped with his shield and massive sword. Deer walked slowly and coldly to the center of the field.

Round 1
Balthazar pushed his massive shield forward and charged:
“I’m going to rip that mask off your face, freak!”

Balthazar’s sword sliced through the air. Deer didn’t even flinch; he simply tilted his head to the side. He didn’t even draw his twin swords from their scabbards. When Balthazar’s shield

strike came, Deer jumped over the man's shield and slipped behind him. He drove the scabbard of his sword hard into the joint of Balthazar's armor. Balthazar dropped to his knees. Deer delivered another blow to the back of his neck with the scabbard, and Balthazar collapsed face-down.

The announcer froze:
"What?! He didn't even draw his swords! Winner of the first round… Deer!"

Round 2
Balthazar stood up in rage and threw his shield aside:
"I'm going to kill you!"

He gripped his sword with both hands and attacked like a mad whirlwind. This time Deer drew his swords. The blue curved steel blades shone in the light. Sparks flew every time Balthazar's heavy blows struck Deer's swords. But Deer didn't take a single step back. On the third blow he caught Balthazar's sword crosswise with both of his, twisted it, and sent the man's sword flying from his hand. Then he struck Balthazar's chest armor with the flat of his sword and sent him flying into the barriers.

The announcer jumped to his feet:
"Without taking a single scratch! Winner of the second match… **Deer**!"

…

Match 3: Jax (Shadow Guild) vs. Thorne (Former Palace Guard)

In the locker room Luna took a deep breath:
"Deer was amazing…"

Kael didn't take his eyes off the door:
"The other matches will be tougher."

The announcer roared again:
"Third match! Coming from our lower city's Shadow Guild, the chain-knife master… **Jax**! And opposite him, an exile from the Eastern Cities, a former Palace Guard and spear master… **Thorne**!"

Round 1
Thorne spun his long spear with both hands and charged forward. The range advantage was entirely Thorne's. Jax tried to wrap the spear with his swinging chain knives, but Thorne was very experienced. He delivered a hard blow to Jax's chin with the back of the spear. Jax staggered backward; Thorne drove the sharp tip of the spear into Jax's shoulder and ended the first round.

Round 2
In the second round Jax started more aggressively despite his injured shoulder. He swung his chains along the ground and raised a cloud of dust. The moment Thorne's vision was blocked, Jax burst from the smoke, wrapped the chain around Thorne's legs, and pulled

hard. Thorne collapsed to the ground. Jax jumped on the man and knocked him out by striking his helmet with the blunt side of his knife.

The announcer screamed:
“A comeback! Winner of the third match, from the Shadow Guild… **Jax**!”

…

The first three matches were complete, and the atmosphere in the arena had grown much hotter. While the fighters in the locker room waited for their turn, Kael, Luna, and Razen had begun preparing their guards for the next matchups.

Match 4: Luna vs. Garrok (Wild Lands Hunter)

The announcer continued to make the center of the arena roar with his enthusiastic voice:
“Ladies and gentlemen! We’re continuing to heat up the stands! Next matchup! From the left gate, coming from the Wild Lands, a massive mace-wielding armored hunter… **Garrok**! And from the right gate, fighting on behalf of the Shadow Guild, a young but ambitious mage… **Luna**!”

When Luna walked onto the field with heavy steps, mocking whistles and laughter rose from the stands. Next to the giant Garrok she looked extremely thin and small.

Round 1
Garrok swung his massive spiked mace and charged forward. Luna tried to flee in panic, but the sandy ground made her foot slip. Garrok brought the mace down hard; stones flew into the air. Luna raised her staff and formed a small protective shield, but a single blow from Garrok’s mace shattered the shield to pieces. The pressure of the blow sent Luna flying into the barriers. She slammed her back hard against the wall and collapsed to the ground.

The announcer shouted:
“An overwhelming difference in power! Winner of the first round, with his brute force… **Garrok**!”

Round 2
Luna brushed herself off and struggled to her feet. The eye contact with Kael, who was watching her from the locker room, gave her courage. Luna took a deep breath. Garrok bellowed and charged at her again.

This time Luna didn’t run. She slammed her staff hard into the ground:
“I told you I once blew up an oven on Aruze’s mission!”

The blue magic energy from her staff focused directly on the sandy ground under Garrok’s feet. The moisture in the ground and the magic reacted; the stones under Garrok’s feet suddenly exploded, causing a small blast. Garrok lost his balance and bent backward. Luna didn’t waste time; she spun her staff and sent a concentrated blast of wind straight into the man’s face. Despite his massive body, Garrok was laid out on his back and lost consciousness.

The announcer jumped from his seat:
“A shocking move of intelligence! The mage girl takes the match with a miraculous comeback! Winner… **Luna**!”

…

Match 5: Kael vs. Malakor (Dark Order Knight)

In the locker room Kael took a deep breath and stretched his shoulders. He checked the smoke bombs on his belt and his short sword.

The announcer shouted into the microphone:
“Fifth matchup! Coming from the eastern border, the dark knight known for his poisoned knives and black armor… **Malakor**! And opposite him, the strategist of the Shadow Guild… **Kael**!”

Round 1
Malakor quickly launched an attack by throwing his poisoned short swords. Kael deflected the moves by a hair’s breadth, but Malakor’s speed was unexpectedly high. The moment Kael’s guard dropped, Malakor delivered a hard kick to his chest armor. Kael was thrown backward. Malakor didn’t miss the opportunity and left a light scratch on Kael’s arm. The poison took effect immediately, and Kael’s left arm began to go numb. Winner of the first round… **Malakor**!

Round 2
Kael was having trouble feeling his left arm, but he kept his calm. He weighed the fight in his mind. When Malakor attacked again, instead of meeting the move with his sword, Kael dropped a smoke bomb to the ground. A dense area of smoke covered the field. Malakor swung his sword blindly inside the smoke. Kael listened to the sounds of the man’s armor and slipped behind him. With his good right arm he drove the hilt of his sword hard into the gap at Malakor’s neck, then tripped the man and pressed his sword to his throat.

The announcer shouted at the top of his lungs:
“A cold-blooded victory! Winner of the second round and the match… **Kael**!”

…

Match 6: Razen vs. Igneous (Fire Kingdom Adventurer)

When the sixth match was announced, the arena nearly collapsed. From the opposite side a warrior with a massive fire-magic sword came out.

The announcer proudly announced:
“Sixth matchup! Coming from the Southern Ridges, the master fighter who covers his sword with flames… **Igneous**! And opposite him… The lone sword master… **Razen**!”

Round 1

Igneous raised his sword into the air; the steel immediately caught fire. He launched a massive wave of fire toward the center of the field. Razen didn't even move from his place. When the fire wave came right at him, he drew his curved sword half a centimeter from its scabbard. The wind pressure that emerged split the fire in two. Razen passed by Igneous with a single step. Before Igneous understood what had happened, he saw Razen behind him; the chest part of his armor was already scratched.

The announcer stammered in surprise:
"A single movement… Winner of the first round… **Razen**!"

Round 2
Igneous raised his flames to maximum in rage and charged at Razen with all his strength. This time Razen fully drew his sword. A blue glow covered the blade. The moment Igneous's flaming attack met Razen's sword, the flames completely went out. Razen struck Igneous's stomach with the blunt side of his sword. The man collapsed to the ground, breathless.

The announcer shouted in astonishment:
"He extinguished the flames in a single stroke! Overwhelming winner of the sixth match… **Razen**!"

…

Six of the first-round matches were complete, and all four members of the team had succeeded in advancing to the next round by winning their own matches.

Match 7: Drakon (Dark Refuge) vs. Vaelen (Silver Wing Clan)

The announcer continued to keep the noise on the field alive with his enthusiastic voice:
"And the seventh match! The destructive sledgehammer master of Dark Refuge… **Drakon**! And the fast archer and dagger specialist coming from the Silver Wing Clan… **Vaelen**!"

Round 1
Vaelen darted toward the edges of the field and tried to keep his distance. The three throwing knives he launched in rapid succession bounced off Drakon's heavy armor, but one lodged in the gap of the armor on his shoulder. Drakon's clumsy swings did nothing more than beat the air. Winner of the first round, with his agility, was **Vaelen**.

Round 2
In the second round Drakon moved to the center of the field and waited. The moment Vaelen circled and prepared to strike, Drakon slammed his massive sledgehammer into the stone ground with all his strength. The shockwave that formed on the ground threw Vaelen off balance. Drakon did not forgive the opening; he struck Vaelen's chest with the handle of the sledgehammer and pinned him against the barriers. Winner of the match and the round was **Drakon**.

…

Match 8: Sarah (Shadow Guild) vs. Kaelen (Desert Nomads)

The announcer announced the last match of the first round:
“Last match of the first round! The mysterious assassin of the Shadow Guild… **Sarah**! Opposite her, the dual scimitar master of the Desert Nomads… **Kaelen**!”

Round 1
Kaelen attacked like a relentless storm with spinning steps and his dual scimitars. Although Sarah tried to deflect the moves by using the shadows, she couldn’t escape Kaelen’s wide-angle cuts. Wounded in her left arm, Sarah was forced to retreat. Winner of the first round was **Kaelen**.

Round 2
In the second round Sarah completely closed the distance. The moment Kaelen swung his scimitar, she slid underneath and moved behind the man. She struck the sensitive point on the back of Kaelen’s neck hard with the hilt of her dagger. Kaelen immediately collapsed to the ground. With her clever escape, **Sarah** wrote her name into the next round.

…

End of the First Round and Surprise in the Locker Room

The announcer screamed into the magical voice orb:
“Thus the 8 legendary fighters advancing to the Quarterfinals have been determined! **Vorak, Deer, Jax, Luna, Kael, Razen, Drakon, and Sarah!** After a short break the matchups will be announced!”

When they returned to the preparation corridor under the field, the atmosphere had grown much more lively. While the winners moved to the rest area assigned to them, Luna, Kael, and Deer had gathered in a corner.

Luna took a large sip from her water skin and fixed her eyes on Razen, who was leaning against a stone pillar further down the corridor. Razen was as calm as always, his hand on the hilt of his sword, eyes closed.

Luna whispered in surprise:
“Kael… What’s this guy doing here? Didn’t he say this was only ‘necessary assistance’? Didn’t he say he was going his own way?”

Deer spoke in a low voice from behind his mask:
“Apparently his path also passed through this arena.”

Kael, however, didn’t look surprised at all. A slight, mysterious smile appeared on his face. He remembered the secret registration Razen had made at the guild the day before, but showed no reaction.

“Everyone in the city is chasing power and reputation,” Kael said as he tightened his bandage. “It’s clear Razen came here for his own reasons. But at least one of our opponents in the next round is of higher quality.”

Luna rolled her eyes:
“I hope I don’t get matched with him in the next round. The guy cut flames with his sword, Kael! I still can’t produce a proper spark!”

Just then the official who was hanging the new matchup list on the board shouted like a scream in the corridor:
“Quarterfinal matchups on the board! Fighters take your places!”

The team moved curiously toward the board.

As the crowd in front of the Quarterfinal board slowly withdrew, the names written on the massive paper on the board caught the eyes of all four.

Luna swallowed as soon as she looked at the board:
“This has to be a joke… It really has to be a joke.”

Kael read the names on the list one by one:
* **Match 1:** Vorak vs. Luna
* **Match 2:** Deer vs. Drakon
* **Match 3:** Kael vs. Jax
* **Match 4:** Razen vs. Sarah

Deer spoke in a low voice:
“No one matched with each other. Yet.”

Kael placed his hand on Luna’s shoulder. The girl’s hands were trembling slightly. She had won the first round with a small trick, but the man opposite her was that massive, armored orc brute of the Iron Fist Guild, Vorak.

“Luna,” Kael said, his voice extremely calm. “Don’t take unnecessary risks. A single blow from that man breaks bones. Keep your distance; if it doesn’t work, don’t hesitate to forfeit.”

Luna smiled tensely:
“Don’t worry, Kael… Forfeiting is my second nature anyway. I mean… that’s what happens when I get hungry.”

…

Match 1: Luna vs. Vorak (Iron Fist Guild)

The announcer screamed into the magical voice orb:
“The Quarterfinals begin! In the first match, the little mage girl **Luna**, opposite the orc giant who ruthlessly knocked out his opponent in the first round… **Vorak**!”

Round 1
Vorak shouldered his massive axe and walked directly toward Luna with ground-shaking steps. Luna immediately struck her staff into the ground and tried to form a shield of ice and wind mixture. But Vorak didn't wait like in the first round. He struck with the reverse of his axe and shattered Luna's magic before it could even form.

The wind pressure created by the axe alone was enough to throw Luna backward. Luna recovered and launched a small fire arrow, but the fire arrow melted against Vorak's thick chest armor. Vorak grabbed Luna's staff with his massive hand and in a single move pulled it from the girl's hand and threw it. The staff slid across the stone ground and went meters away.

Vorak puffed out his massive chest and bellowed. Luna was left unarmed and defenseless. Just before the referee could give the signal, Luna raised both hands into the air:
"All right! I quit! I forfeit!"

The announcer shouted:
"The mage girl makes a smart decision and forfeits! The first semifinalist of the Quarterfinals… **Vorak**!"

When Luna left the field and returned to the corridor, she let out a deep breath. Kael and Deer met her at the door. Luna picked up her staff from the ground and smiled:
"I did what I could, Kael. That man is a complete wall."

Kael squeezed the girl's shoulder:
"You held up very well, Luna. You did the right thing."

…

Match 2: Deer vs. Drakon (Dark Refuge)

The announcer roared:
"Second match! The masked sword master **Deer** and the sledgehammer giant of Dark Refuge… **Drakon**!"

Round 1
Drakon wanted to create a shockwave by slamming his sledgehammer into the ground like in the previous match. But this time Deer had read the move in advance. Just before the sledgehammer hit the ground he jumped into the air, stepped on the handle of the sledgehammer, and climbed onto Drakon's shoulder. He drew his twin swords and delivered two hard blows with the blunt sides of the swords to the side of Drakon's helmet. Drakon's head spun; he lost his balance and dropped to his knees. Winner of the first round was **Deer**.

Round 2
Drakon swung his sledgehammer blindly in rage. Deer slid inside like a shadow with every swing of the sledgehammer. Without delivering a single sword cut, he simply exhausted Drakon with his speed and body feints. The moment Drakon was out of breath, Deer cut the

binding straps behind the man's armor with his sword. The massive armor pieces fell to the ground with a thud. Deer pressed the tip of his sword against Drakon's bare throat.

The announcer shouted in astonishment:
"An incredible technique! The second name advancing to the semifinals… **Deer**!"

…

Match 3: Kael vs. Jax (Shadow Guild)

The announcer announced excitedly:
"Third match! Two minds of the Shadow Guild face each other! **Kael** and the chain-knife master **Jax**!"

Round 1
Jax swung his chain knives, making them whistle through the air. The knives began to circle around Kael like a net. Kael tried to deflect the knives with his sword, but one of the chains wrapped around Kael's sword and Jax pulled hard, sending Kael's sword flying from his hand. Kael was left unarmed. Jax grazed Kael's shoulder with the second knife. Winner of the first round was **Jax**.

Round 2
In the second round Kael took his sword in hand again, but this time he didn't attack directly. When Jax swung his chains again, instead of fleeing backward Kael calmly prepared a smoke bomb. When the smoke covered the ground, Kael drew his knife and threw it at the stones inside the smoke. Focusing on the direction of the sound, Jax threw his chain that way. But Kael had used the knife as bait! Kael appeared right behind Jax, twisted the arm holding the chain, and drove the hilt of his sword into Jax's temple. Jax lost consciousness and collapsed to the ground.

The announcer screamed:
"A display of tactical intelligence! Winner of the match… **Kael**!"

…

Match 4: Razen vs. Sarah (Shadow Guild)

The announcer announced the last quarterfinal match:
"Last match of the Quarterfinals! The mysterious assassin of the Shadow Guild **Sarah** and the mysterious sword master **Razen**!"

Round 1
Sarah started the match very quickly. She slipped through the shadows and moved behind Razen, throwing both of her daggers at once toward the man's neck. Razen didn't even turn around. He simply raised the scabbard of his sword toward his back; the daggers struck the metal scabbard. Razen struck Sarah in the chest with a light elbow blow. Sarah retreated, breathless. Winner of the first round was **Razen**.

Round 2
Sarah charged again with fury, this time attacking from a low angle toward his legs. Razen drew his sword one centimeter from its scabbard. The sharp air current that emerged cut Sarah's move in midair. Razen struck the girl's wrist with the scabbard of his sword; the daggers fell into the mud. Then he lightly touched the tip of the scabbard to Sarah's forehead.

Sarah closed her eyes and sighed:
"I forfeit…"

The announcer shouted:
"Advancing to the semifinals without any difficulty! Winner… **Razen**!"

…

Thus the semifinalists were determined: **Vorak, Deer, Kael, and Razen.**

Luna looked at the team from the side. Three of the four semifinalists were from their own group. Now the inevitable moment was approaching; the probability of them matching against each other was almost certain.

Semifinal Board

When the new matchups were announced on the massive screen of the arena and on the board in the preparation corridor, the entire lower city seemed to hold its breath.

The announcer's magical voice thundered over the arena like thunder:
"Ladies and gentlemen! Only two steps remain to the championship! Here are the massive, breathtaking matchups of the semifinals!"

* **Semifinal 1:** Vorak (Iron Fist Guild) vs. Deer
* **Semifinal 2:** Kael vs. Razen Takayukinobu

Luna looked at the board in the corridor and opened her eyes wide:
"Kael… You matched with Razen. The guy almost never fully drew his sword from its scabbard throughout the tournament!"

Kael tightened his bandages one last time and smiled slightly:
"Everyone has a weak point, Luna. The important thing is to wait for that moment."

Deer was silently checking the curve of his swords in the corner. Vorak was that destructive giant who had left Luna unarmed and forced her to forfeit.

…

Semifinal 1: Vorak vs. Deer

The announcer roared toward the center of the arena:

“First semifinal! On the left side, the destruction machine of Iron Fist who crushes everything in his path… **Vorak**! On the right side, the most mysterious, sharpest sword master of the tournament… **Deer**!”

The stands were divided in two. The bellows of the orc giant and the cold-blooded stance of the masked warrior had tensed the arena.

Round 1
Vorak started the match as always with a savage charge. He swung his massive double-sided axe through the air like a whirlwind, trying to pin Deer against the barriers. Deer, without panicking, slightly shifted his steps backward. With every landing of the axe the stone ground cracked and a cloud of dust spread around.

While Vorak was making a wide swing, Deer jumped over the handle of the axe like a shadow. He drew his twin swords and, spinning in the air, left two rapid scratches on the joints of Vorak’s armor. The orc bellowed and swung the axe backward, but Deer had already landed and opened the distance. Winner of the first round, with his agility and the first blood drawn, was **Deer**.

Round 2
Vorak, with the rage of the defeat in the first round, threw his axe aside. He charged forward with heavy steps and switched directly to unarmed combat, to brute force. Deer swung his swords, but this time Vorak blocked the blows with his armored arms and closed to chest-to-chest distance. Vorak grabbed Deer’s throat with his massive armored hand and slammed him hard onto the stone ground!

Deer’s deer skull mask cracked from the impact against the stone; a muffled groan rose from inside. Vorak raised his other massive fist, but while on the ground Deer locked Vorak’s kneecap from behind with his legs. The orc collapsed to the ground with his massive body. Deer rose in pain and drove the hilt of his sword hard into Vorak’s temple. The orc lost consciousness and collapsed into the mud.

The announcer jumped from his seat:
“Incredible endurance! The masked warrior who laid the orc giant low becomes the first finalist! Winner… **Deer**!”

…

Semifinal 2: Kael vs. Razen Takayukinobu

The arena fell into silence for what was perhaps the most strategic match of the tournament. Kael was on the field with his short sword and smoke bombs. Razen, bare upper body, turbaned, and with his curved sword at his waist, walked with his usual smooth calm.

The announcer announced:
“Second semifinal! The strategy genius of the Shadow Guild **Kael** and the undefeated sword master from the east… **Razen Takayukinobu**!”

Round 1
Kael did not leave himself open directly. He circled with circular steps without entering Razen's range. Razen waited patiently with his hand on the hilt of his sword. Kael suddenly lunged and dropped a smoke bomb to the ground. The field was covered with gray mist. Kael created echoes by throwing stones in three different directions from inside the smoke and attacked Razen from behind.

But Razen had even closed his eyes. He simply listened to the sound of the wind and Kael's footsteps. Just as Kael's sword was about to land on his back, Razen, without drawing his sword from its scabbard, delivered a hard jab to Kael's stomach with the lower part of the scabbard. Kael's breath was cut short and he was thrown backward. Razen slipped through the smoke and struck the wrist holding Kael's sword with the tip of the scabbard. The sword fell to the ground. Winner of the first round was **Razen**.

Round 2
In the second round Kael completely changed his strategy. He brought out his intelligence and unyielding nature. He took his sword and ran directly at Razen. Razen again raised the scabbard of his sword with the same cold-bloodedness. But Kael cut the move short, dropped himself to the ground, and slid through Razen's legs on the muddy ground!

While sliding, Kael left a light cut with his small knife on the knot of the turban at Razen's waist. Razen's balance was momentarily disturbed; his turban loosened. For the first time Razen furrowed his brows and took on a serious expression. Kael quickly stood up and, in that half-second of opening Razen left, threw his sword. Razen was finally forced to fully draw his curved sword from its scabbard to catch the sword in the air!

The blue steel shone in the light. Razen split Kael's sword in two with a single circular cut and pressed the sharp tip of his sword against Kael's throat.

The field froze. Kael was out of breath but smiling. Kael dropped the hilt of his split sword to the ground:
"At least I managed to make him draw that sword from its scabbard."

Razen slowly sheathed his sword. Deep respect for Kael appeared in his eyes:
"Your strategy was good. You were the first person to force me to draw my sword."

The announcer shouted at the top of his lungs:
"He managed to make him draw his sword, but the winner remains the same! The great finalist… **Razen Takayukinobu**!"

…

Thus the name of the grand final was set: **Deer vs. Razen Takayukinobu!**

As Kael left the field, Luna immediately ran to his side:
"Kael! You were incredible—you made the guy draw his sword for the first time!"

Kael smiled, holding his shoulder:

“It wasn’t enough, but at least we saw his limits. Now it’s Deer’s turn.”

Deer adjusted his cracked mask and looked at Razen. The two master sword fighters would face each other one last time for the championship cup and the gold.

The Grand Final: Deer vs. Razen Takayukinobu

As the sun slowly took on crimson tones and disappeared behind the gloomy buildings of the Lower City, the cool shadows of evening settled over the arena. The arena officials began lighting the massive torches one by one. The crackling torch flames and orange shadows created an eerie and magnificent atmosphere on the stone ground.

The announcer raised the magical voice orb with all his strength and roared:
“Ladies and gentlemen! As night falls, we have come to the end of a legend written with blood, sweat, and steel! Before you stand the two great legends of the Lower City Tournament!”

Thousands of people in the stands rose to their feet. The applause and shouts made the roof of the arena ring.

“On one side, carrying a relentless storm behind his cracked mask… **Deer**! On the other side, the undefeated warrior who has imprisoned the wind of the east in his sword… **Razen Takayukinobu**!”

Luna and Kael were standing at the edge of the player tunnel, holding their breath as they watched the field.

Luna whispered excitedly:
“It’s gotten really dark… Fighting in the torchlight will make everything even harder.”

Kael fixed his eyes on the two warriors:
“No, Luna. This play of light and shadow is exactly what both of them are looking for.”

…

Round 1: The Dance of Steel

The two fighters approached the center of the field until only a few steps remained between them. While the wind tossed the torch flames, neither of them moved for a long time.

Deer looked at Razen through the cracked eyes of the deer skull from behind his cracked mask and slowly drew his twin swords. Razen, as always, placed his hand on the hilt of the curved sword at his waist.

The first move that broke the silence came from Deer! Deer lunged forward as if slipping from the shadows, delivering a low diagonal cut with his right sword while directing his left sword toward Razen’s throat.

This time Razen was serious from the first round! He fully drew his curved sword from its scabbard. The gleam of the steel left a blue trail in the darkness.

CLANG! CLANG!

Sparks flashed in the darkness as the swords struck each other. The two masters were attacking each other at incredible speed. Deer tried to establish pressure using the advantage of the twin swords, but Razen's defense with a single sword was like an impregnable wall.

With a sudden wrist movement Razen deflected Deer's left sword upward and delivered a hard blow to Deer's cracked mask with the hilt of his sword. Another piece of the mask broke off and fell into the mud. Deer was forced to retreat.

The announcer shouted:
"First blood drawn! After the fierce clash, winner of the first round… **Razen**!"

…

Round 2: The Fight of Shadows

Deer took deep breaths and adjusted his broken mask with the back of his hand. He had lost the first round, but he had no intention of giving up. Night had fully settled; the long shadows created by the torches covered the field.

As soon as the second round began, Deer scraped his swords against the ground, creating sparks from the stones, and shifted his steps toward the dark shadow angles formed by the torches. He suddenly changed his rhythm and began circling around Razen like a ghost.

Razen tried to feel the wind, but Deer was using the shadows so well that his steps made almost no sound. Deer suddenly leaped out of the shadow, throwing his first sword as bait. The moment Razen deflected the sword, Deer attacked from below with his second sword!

The sharp tip of the sword tore the fabric on Razen's chest and left a shallow scratch. Although Razen moved backward to avoid losing his balance, Deer did not give the opportunity; he struck Razen's shoulder hard with the blunt side of his sword. Razen dropped to one knee.

The announcer screamed:
"An incredible comeback! The master of shadows is equalizing the balance! Winner of the second round… **Deer**!"

…

Round 3 (Deciding Round): The Final Cut

The field froze. Both fighters had reached the final round. Night had completely settled; only the orange lights of the torches and the moonlight illuminated the field. Razen looked at the

small wound on his chest, then turned his eyes to Deer. For the first time a slight, appreciative smile appeared on his face.

“Your spirit is strong,” Razen said in a low and deep voice. “Your sword is too.”

Deer held his swords crossed in reply:
“Let’s finish this.”

Both gathered their last energy. The arena seemed to make no sound other than the breathing of the two people. Thousands of spectators waited with full attention for the final move on the field.

Both lunged forward at the same time!

Razen pulled his sword back and assumed the legendary eastern technique of the “Single Breath Cutter.” His sword shone with a blue aura. Deer joined his two swords and made a thrusting move forward with all his body weight.

Time seemed to slow. The two warriors passed each other at lightning speed under the torchlight.

CHIIING!

Both froze with their backs turned. No one was moving. A few seconds of deadly silence settled over the arena.

First the sword in Deer’s right hand split in two and fell to the ground. Then Deer’s deer skull mask completely split in two and collapsed into the mud. From under the mask Deer’s tired but upright face was revealed. Deer dropped to his knees.

Razen slowly turned and sheathed his sword. **CLICK!** The moment the sword settled into its scabbard, a thin scratch appeared on Razen’s upper garment, but he himself stood perfectly upright.

The announcer shouted at the top of his lungs until his voice gave out:
“AND HERE IS THE CHAMPION! This year’s winner of the Lower City Tournament, the undefeated sword master… **RAZEN TAKAYUKINOBU**!”

The stands practically exploded! Applause, cheers, and small magic shows resembling fireworks illuminated the night sky.

Razen walked toward Deer, who was on his knees, and extended his hand. Deer took Razen’s hand and stood up. Razen said in a low voice, “You’re an excellent fighter.”

Luna and Kael ran onto the field. Luna was shouting with joy and surprise:
“It was an incredible match! Incredible!”

Kael placed his hand on Deer’s shoulder:

“You did an amazing job.”

Deer looked at the broken mask pieces on the ground, then smiled slightly:
“At least I got rid of my mask.”

The tournament was over; night had completely covered the Lower City. Now it was time for the reward they had won and the new future of the guild.

…

In the pitch darkness of the night, a massive castle rising even beyond the sky… This was “Above.” Above the clouds and the stars, completely isolated from the mortal world, a magnificent palace resembling the dwelling of the gods. The white marbles that formed the castle glowed faintly with magical light veins worked into them; the massive crystal columns and gold-embellished arches displayed a splendor that humankind could not even imagine.

A young girl leaning against the ornate railings of the highest terrace of the palace was watching the deep space and the world stretching out below them like a fog cloud, as if enchanted. Her silk-woven dress, which changed color according to the light, was floating in the wind.

She slowly let out a deep sigh. Her gaze drifted to those dark, vague lands beneath the clouds:
“I wonder what’s happening down there… I can’t help but think about it. Is it really as bad and barbaric as they say?”

Just then, an authoritative and cold female voice echoing from behind the massive crystal doors opening onto the terrace cut her thoughts like a knife:
“Are you spending your time in the same place again, with the same meaningless dreams?”

Without turning around, the girl rolled her eyes. Her mother, with a pride befitting palace elegance, stepped toward the terrace, her gold-embellished dress trailing.

Her mother reached her daughter’s side and fixed her cold gaze downward, on the world:
“The Council reconvened today. The productivity of the regions under our family’s responsibility is being discussed. And you are looking into the void here. It is time we talk about your future.”

The girl quickly turned to her mother. There was deep boredom and anger on her face:
“Enough already. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Stop involving me with the whispers heard from the Council’s door.”

Her mother slightly furrowed her brows and hardened her voice:
“What do you mean, stop involving you? You are a part of this lineage!”

“I’m sick of your fake elitism and your merciless rules!” the girl retorted, her voice echoing on the terrace. “Especially that disgusting ‘Resource Quota’ decision of yours! When will you

stop ignoring the lives of the people below with a single stroke and setting quotas, crushing them?”

Her mother looked at her daughter with a mixture of disgust and surprise:
“Do not overstep your bounds, **Eline**! Those below are nothing more than the raw materials needed for us to sustain our existence. Pitying them is not fitting for a god.”

“I don’t want to be a ‘god’ like you,” Eline said in a whisper.

Without saying another word to her mother, she turned her back and began walking rapidly toward the depths of the palace. She ignored her mother’s call from behind.

…

Hours later, a deep silence reigned in the Magical Teleportation Chamber on the lowest floor of the castle, accessible only to high-ranking officials of the Upper Class. The runes on the walls trembled faintly with blue light.

Eline, having pulled the hood of her cloak over her head, had managed to slip into the room by putting the guards to sleep with a magical sleep powder. Her heart was pounding. She could no longer endure the lies of the Council, her family’s merciless ‘Resource Quota’ mindset, and that false paradise Above. She had to see the world below, the reality of those people, with her own eyes.

She approached the control panel of the teleportation gate. Her fingers rapidly moved over the tangled magic runes. The only way to descend was to manipulate the system, but this gate was set only for authorized ranks.

Eline took a deep breath:
“Since you won’t give permission… I’ll break the gate.”

Eline sabotaged the security core of the gate with the small secret magic device in her hand. The system suddenly filled with red lights; sparks began to fly from the panels! The circular passage in the middle of the gate went out of control and began spinning like a massive vortex.

Without the slightest hesitation, Eline threw herself into that vortex.

However, the sabotage had an unexpected result. The uncontrolled dimensional energy placed a heavy burden on Eline’s body. The security mechanism of the gate, to prevent unauthorized passage, violently suppressed all the magic power on the girl and carved a heavy seal onto her body.

As Eline descended like a meteor through the atmosphere, she felt the noble power flowing in her veins completely locked. Her vision darkened; her consciousness began to fade.

…

At midnight, a violent beam of light fell into the middle of a desolate, deep valley meters away from the Lower City.

When the cloud of dust and light smoke cleared, a young girl remained lying unconscious on the wet grass. Eline, the magnificent daughter of the Upper Class, now with her power sealed, helpless and completely alone, was lying in that “world below” she hated.

…

As the roar of the tournament field and the torch smoke were left behind, night had completely settled over the narrow and damp streets of the Lower City.

Our group could barely take a step. Kael was holding his ribs; Luna was leaning on her staff and taking deep breaths every three steps. Deer was walking silently with the night wind striking his maskless face, while Razen, whom they were dragging along behind them, was walking two steps behind as always.

Luna turned her head back and began complaining:
“Razen… If you take one more step I’ll blow you up with a smoke bomb. It’s as if you’re not the tournament champion and we’re the ones who have to carry you!”

Razen adjusted his turban slightly; his voice was icy:
“You were the ones who forced me to this celebration. I don’t like alcohol; I hate noise.”

Kael laughed lightly, holding his chest:
“You wouldn’t have come if we hadn’t said the champion would pay the bill.”

Deer chuckled for the first time. Without his mask, the tired but content expression on his face was clearly visible:
“The man’s right. He won the gold; we’ll drink the soup.”

Luna was about to make another jab at Razen when a light moan rose from among the rocks on the path entering the city from the valley.

Kael suddenly stopped. His hand went reflexively to the short sword at his waist. He made a stop sign to those behind him with two fingers.

“Be quiet,” Kael said in a whisper. “There’s something.”

Razen placed his hand on the hilt of his sword; Deer gripped the remaining solid part of his half-broken sword. They slowly stepped toward the back of the rocks.

On the dusty, wet grass a young girl was lying unconscious, her clothes torn, her silk dress soaked in mud.

Luna immediately rushed forward:
“Ahh! There’s a girl here! Kael, look, she’s alive!”

Kael carefully approached the girl. He looked at the texture of the fabric on her; it was a strange silk of a quality that no one in the Lower City could wear, absorbing light. Just as they were about to shake the girl by the shoulder to wake her, Eline slowly opened her eyes.

Eline's head was throbbing. Her powers were sealed; the divine magic flow in her veins seemed cut off. When she saw the four shadows appearing in front of her, she panicked and retreated:
(Eline's inner voice: "Where am I? Who are these lowlifes? My power… Where is my power?!")

Deer took a step forward. With the scars on his face and the broken sword at his waist, he looked quite intimidating:
"Who are you? What are you looking for in the valley at this hour?"

With Deer's words, Eline eavesdropped on the conversation of the two people behind.

Luna was furiously crying out:
"To hell with the Ones Above! We're in this state because of their disgusting deeds anyway! If I get my hands on one of them, I'll bring their world down on their heads!"

Deer also added in an icy voice:
"I won't let any living thing that falls from Above leave this city without breaking its bones."

An icy sweat ran down Eline's back. Her heart began to pound as if it would leap from her chest.
(Eline's inner voice: "Shit… Shit, shit! They hate me! If they find out I came from Above, that I'm a 'god,' they'll burn me alive right here! And I don't even have the magic to protect myself!")

Kael, however, wasn't speaking at all. He had fixed his sharp blue eyes on Eline, examining the girl like a hunter. He was scrutinizing the fabric on the girl, the smoothness of her hands, and her demeanor.

Eline immediately noticed Kael's poisonously working intelligence and suspicious gaze.
(Eline's inner voice: "That red-haired one… He's dangerous. The others are brute force, but this man will figure me out with a single look! I have to do something… Right away!")

Eline suddenly opened her eyes wide. Her lips began to tremble. She threw herself to the ground, curled up in the mud, put her hands on her head, and began shouting in a tearful and clumsy voice at the top of her lungs:

"Ayyy! Please don't hit me! Don't hit me, gentlemen, my lords!"

Luna paused in surprise:
"What? No one hit you?"

Eline rolled in the mud with excessive fear and clumsiness, wiping her tears on the sleeve of her coat:

“I-I… I’m just a strange village girl! Our village… Um… Was overrun by giant rats! I got lost while the bandits were playing chase! I have nothing; I must have fallen off the merchants’ cart! Please don’t eat me; I’m already very weak, and my meat is tasteless!”

(Eline’s inner voice: “Great job, Eline, congratulations. While being a grand palace noble, you’ve turned yourself into a snotty villager chased by rats. But it’s better than being caught by these lowlifes!”)

Razen rolled his eyes:
“Giant rats?”

Eline immediately opened her hands toward Razen and trembled:
“Yes, master lord! Huge rats with red eyes! I’m a very cowardly person; I’m even afraid of my own shadow! I don’t know anything—I don’t know what magic is, what a castle is! I only know how to peel potatoes… And I usually cut my finger doing that!”

(Eline’s inner voice: “As if I’m going to peel potatoes… I’ve never even put the food on my own plate in my life! My God, what situations have I fallen into!”)

Luna’s eyes filled with compassion. She immediately crouched beside the girl and hugged her shoulder:
“Oh, my poor thing… How sweet and innocent. Kael, look, the poor girl is trembling with fear! Giant rats chased her!”

Kael was still not convinced. He knelt beside the girl. He fixed his gaze into Eline’s eyes:
“A village girl, you say? Then what’s this silk fabric on you? Even a merchant in the Lower City couldn’t wear this.”

Eline’s heart almost stopped for a moment.
(Eline’s inner voice: “Caught! Think, Eline, urgently invent a lie!”)

Eline immediately wrinkled her face and tugged at her dress:
“This? Ayyy, I found this in the market garbage, my lord! It looked so fancy; I said ‘maybe I’ll make a wedding dress out of it,’ but it got all muddy! Besides, it irritates my skin a lot; it looks like a bug on me!”

(Eline’s inner voice: “If my mother heard me call imperial silk a bug, she’d launch me into space with her own hands…”)

Luna pushed Kael:
“Kael! Stop cornering the girl! Can’t you see she’s so scared she doesn’t even know what she’s saying, the poor thing. She’s just a lonely, orphaned girl!”

Kael stood up. The girl’s excessively clumsy and absurd behavior was so exaggerated that the possibility of her being an agent or a threat seemed almost zero. Still, the strategist voice inside Kael was not completely convinced.

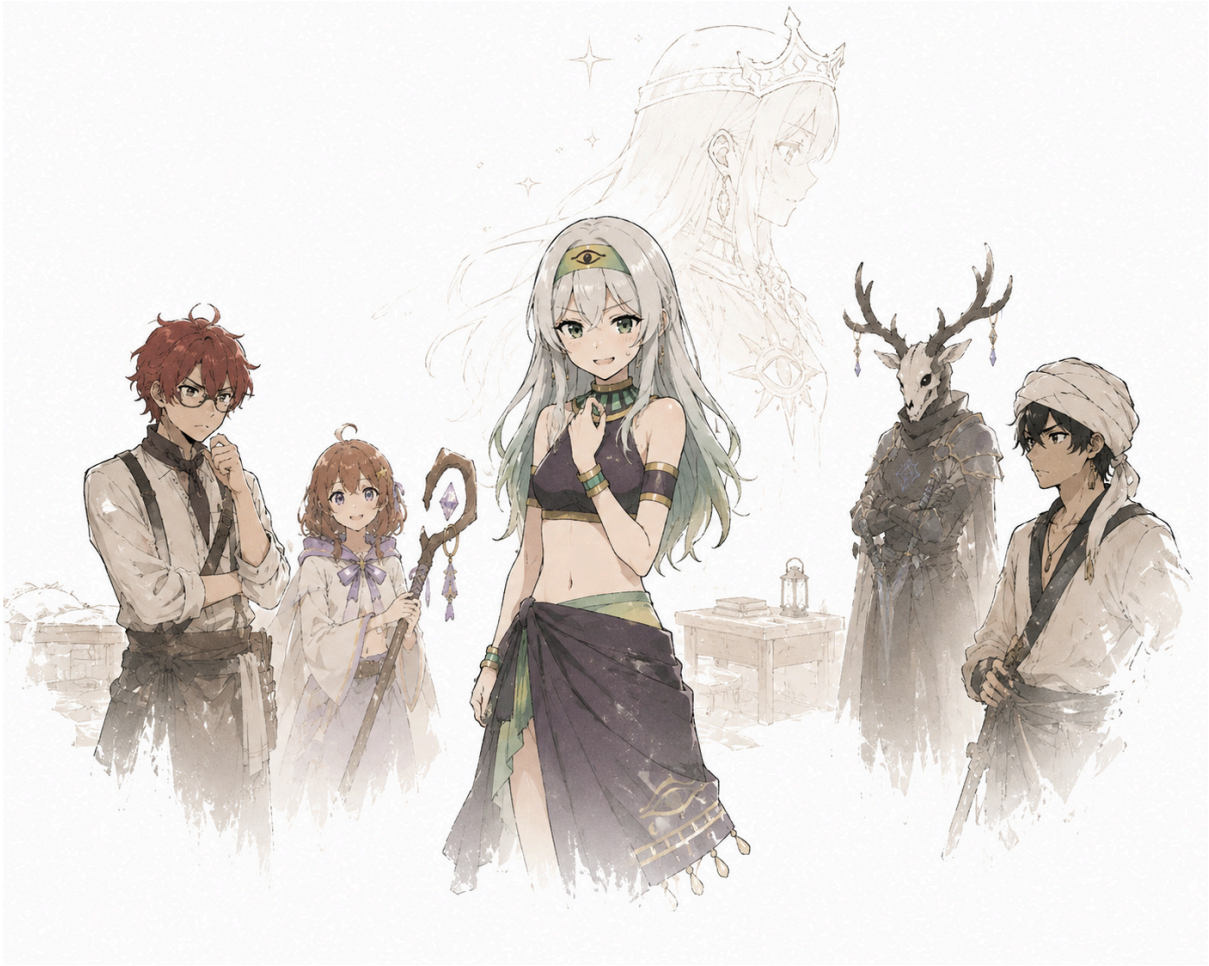
Kael let out a deep breath:

“All right. We can’t leave her on the street. She can come with us to the inn. But I’ll be watching you, ‘village girl.’”

Eline collapsed into the mud on the ground again with exaggerated joy:
“Thank you, red-haired lord! Thank you so much! I’ll serve you, I’ll wash your feet—I mean, I won’t, I’d be disgusted, but I’ll bring soup!”

(Eline’s inner voice: “Hah! They bought the act. For now I’m safe with these lower-city lowlifes. Until my powers return, I’ll continue playing this cute, stupid villager role. But that red-haired one… I have to be very careful with him.”)

Thus the ragtag team continued walking toward the inn, taking with them Eline, the palace noble whose powers were sealed, the “clumsy village girl.”



Chapter 4: A New Morning

With the intense light assaulting her eyelids and the damp smell filling her nose, Eline slowly sat up.

The throbbing in her head was unbearable. When she fully opened her eyes, she realized that what she was lying on was not a silk quilt, but a hard, coarse-textured straw mattress. Just then she started at the sound of a deep breath coming from beside her. When she turned her head to the left, she saw Luna sleeping soundly, arms spread wide, hugging the pillow as if embracing her staff.

Eline panicked and jumped back on the bed; her back hit the cold stone wall.

(Eline’s inner voice: “What?! Where am I?! What is this damp, foul-smelling cellar?! Did I… did I sleep in the same bed as a mortal?! My God, there are pieces of straw on me! What am I doing here?!”)

Just then the creaky wooden door of the cellar opened with a noise. Kael entered carrying two wooden cups with steam rising from them.

When Eline saw Kael, her eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. In fear she pulled the straw toward her chest with her hands and curled even tighter against the base of the wall.

(Eline's inner voice: "Shit! That dangerous red-haired type! Did I really stay in the shelter of these lower-city lowlifes?! If my powers weren't sealed I would turn them all to ash with a single finger, but right now my only defense is this stupid role!")

Kael paused when he saw the girl's extreme reaction. He set the wooden cups on the table in the corner and slightly raised his eyebrows:
"Are you all right, Eline? You look a bit panicked. Did you have a nightmare?"

Eline immediately pursed her lips, fluttered her eyes, and put on an excessively clumsy act with a trembling voice:
"M-my lord! Red-haired lord! I… where is this place? What happened to me last night? Why am I in this dark hole? Did the giant rats bring me here?"

Kael chuckled lightly, pulled his small notebook from his pocket, and placed it on the table:
"Not giant rats. We found you in the valley last night, don't you remember? You kept talking about giant rats and mud. Then we came to the inn; you collapsed onto the table while drinking your soup and fell asleep. Luna carried you here, to her own room."

Eline paused for a moment.
(Eline's inner voice: "Soup? Did I really drink that mud-like thing and pass out?! Disgrace… A complete disgrace!")

Eline immediately clasped her hands and bowed exaggeratedly toward Kael:
"Ayyy! I must have drunk too much… Well, I mean, I fell asleep from the excitement! Thank you so much for not throwing me out onto the street, my lord. I'm a village girl; I'm used to the cold, but this place… well, it's quite luxurious!"

(Eline's inner voice: "Luxurious, she says… Even the toilet in my castle is wider and cleaner than this whole inn!")

Just then Luna suddenly jumped awake from the bed. Her hair was a mess.
"Kael! Did you bring hot soup?! Good morning, Eline! How was it, was the bed comfortable?"

Eline nodded with a forced smile:
"Very… very soft, sister. The straw practically caressed my skin!"

(Eline's inner voice: "My whole body is itching and stinging, damn it!")

…

An hour later, Eline had forcibly cleaned the muddy clothes she was wearing and followed the team out into the noisy streets of the Lower City.

In front, Kael and Deer walked calmly; behind them Luna and Eline came side by side. Razen, as always, followed a couple of steps behind like a lone shadow.

Luna linked arms with Eline and spoke cheerfully:
“Look, Eline, now we’re going to the Shadow Guild. Since we won the tournament last night, we’ll collect our reward and new missions. Don’t be afraid; you’re safe with us.”

Eline struggled not to wrinkle her face as she surveyed the rundown stalls, shouting merchants, and muddy streets around them:
“The Shadow Guild? Is that… a very big place, sister? Would they let a poor orphan like me inside?”

(Eline’s inner voice: “As if I’m so curious about your muddy guild. But until I find a way back above, I have no choice but to follow these lowlifes.”)

Kael spoke without turning his head back:
“The guild is open to everyone, Eline. But try not to make any strange moves there. The place is full of dangerous types.”

Eline quickly nodded:
“Don’t worry, red-haired lord! I’ll crouch in a corner and make no sound at all! I’ll stay quiet as a mouse!”

(Eline’s inner voice: “Quiet as a mouse… Spit on my own mouth, Eline, you said ‘mouse’ again. The man will literally think I’m a cockroach!”)

Deer cut in with a low voice:
“She doesn’t need to be afraid. We have Razen with us, the tournament champion.”

Razen added from behind in an icy voice:
“I’m no one’s caretaker.”

Luna rolled her eyes:
“Ohhh, here goes our champion again! Fine, Razen, don’t protect Eline; just walk behind us looking cool!”

Eline turned and looked at Razen. When she noticed the curved sword at his waist and the sharpness in his posture, she thought to herself:
(Eline’s inner voice: “This man… His gaze is not normal at all. The red-haired one is smart; this turbaned one is pure danger. He looks more dangerous than even the best of the guards Above. I absolutely must get myself accepted into this group without them noticing.”)

Talking as they went, they arrived in front of the massive building of the Shadow Guild with its wooden and iron doors. When they stepped inside, the noise, the clinking of glasses, and the growls of adventure struck all their faces.

Eline took a deep breath and whispered to herself:

(Eline's inner voice: "All right, Eline… The game continues. Continue the clumsy village girl role.")

…

The main hall of the Shadow Guild was, as always, crowded and noisy. Armed men played cards around the long tables; some were bandaging wounded arms, others looking at the notice board on the wall. The air smelled of alcohol, iron, and light sweat.

Eline clenched her teeth to keep from wrinkling her nose.
(Eline's inner voice: "What a disgrace… Even a corridor Above doesn't smell this foul. But endure. Endure, Eline.")

Kael stepped forward and walked toward the bearded guild master behind the counter. The man raised his eyebrows when he saw them and set down the glass in his hand.

"Here are the winners of the tournament… and one extra face." His eyes shifted to Eline. "Who is this?"

Luna immediately cut in:
"This is Eline! We found her in the valley last night. Her village was overrun by rats; she got lost. She's staying with us for now. She's harmless, I promise."

The guild master shrugged.
"The guild walls are open to everyone… as long as they don't cause trouble." Then he lowered his voice and turned to Kael. "There's a special mission for you. Related to the Ones Above."

Deer's shoulders tensed. Even on his maskless face the hatred was clear.
"Bonebreakers…" he murmured in a low, icy voice.

The guild master nodded.
"Yes. For the past few days people have been disappearing from the old mine on the eastern border of the lower city. Adults, children… it doesn't matter. We followed the tracks. In the depths of the main tunnel there's an old teleportation gate used by the Ones Above. They're pulling people up from there. For the resource quota… or for worse things."

Eline's breath caught for a moment.
(Eline's inner voice: "What… What did you say?! Human abduction? Main tunnel? Teleportation gate?! I… I had no idea such a place existed. The Council… my mother… were they lying? Or did I simply not know?")

Kael kept his calm, but his eyes had sharpened.
"What exactly is the mission?"

"You'll raid the tunnel. Close the gate if possible, rescue the abducted, and if anyone from above has come down… leave no one behind." The guild master pulled a thick envelope

from the table. “The reward is high. But so is the risk. There could be at least a dozen Bonebreaker guards inside and two low-ranking mages from above.”

Deer pressed on the hilts of his swords.
“We’re going.”

Razen adjusted the edge of his turban; his voice was as distant as always:
“I’m coming too. This kind of work… needs to be cleaned.”

Luna rested her staff on her shoulder, excited but a little tense:
“We’re five people now! Eline is with us too… right, Eline?”

Eline froze for a moment. Then she pressed her hands to her chest with an exaggerated expression of fear:
“M-me?! M-my lord… I only know how to peel potatoes! Fighting and all… I’m very cowardly; even my own shadow—”

Kael looked at her. There was suspicion in his gaze, but his voice came out steady:
“You won’t come to fight. You’ll stay in the back and guide those who escape. If you’re useless, at least you won’t be a burden.”

(Eline’s inner voice: “A burden?! I… I was the daughter of the Upper Class, you man! But… this tunnel… does it really exist? My mother said ‘those below are only raw materials.’ Are they really abducting people?”)

The guild master held out the envelope to Kael.
“The details and the map are inside. Meet at the mouth of the tunnel at midnight. If you fail… don’t expect to return.”

Kael took the envelope and turned to the team.
“Prepare. Potions, smoke, spare weapons… take whatever there is. This time it’s not just a guild mission.”

Deer added in a low voice:
“This time Bonebreaker blood will be spilled.”

Eline stood in the background, her hands trembling slightly.
(Eline’s inner voice: “This… this can’t be true. Things like this weren’t talked about Above. Or… did I really not know? Or did I not want to know?”)

Luna linked arms with Eline, in a cheerful but protective voice:
“Don’t be afraid. We’re here. Just follow us, okay?”

Eline forced a smile.
“O-okay, sister… I’ll be quiet as a mouse.”

Kael tucked the envelope into his pocket and gave the team one last look.
“We’re five. We meet in the tunnel tonight. If you’re late, you’ll be left behind.”

When they stepped outside, the sky was covered with gray clouds. The streets of the Lower City were as noisy as always, but the team's steps fell heavier.

As Eline walked at the very back, she looked at Kael's red hair, Deer's scarred face, and Razen's silent shadow.
(Eline's inner voice: "Human abduction… main tunnel… Bonebreakers. If these are true… then my mother and the Council lied. And I… as their daughter, am here beside the ones hunting them.")

She lowered her eyes to the ground.
She had to continue the role.
At least for now.

…

Toward midnight the team advanced toward the old mine on the eastern border of the Lower City. The air was cool and damp. The moon had disappeared behind the clouds; only the torchlights flickered on the stone path.

Kael walked in front, occasionally checking the map. Deer was on his right, swords at his waist, silent. Luna and Eline walked side by side; Razen came a few steps behind as always.

Luna turned to Eline while yawning:
"Eline… When do you plan to return to your village? I mean, once the rats and all disperse."

Eline paused for a moment.
(Eline's inner voice: "My village? Which village? I have no village… But the role must continue.")

She answered with a trembling voice:
"I-I don't know, sister… Maybe… maybe when the rats leave. But being alone now is scary. I feel safer with you."

Kael looked over his shoulder.
"Feeling safe isn't free. If you're useful tonight, maybe you can stay. Otherwise…"

Luna nudged Kael:
"Cut it out. Don't scare the girl."

Deer cut in with a low voice:
"We're entering the Bonebreakers' tunnel. Being afraid is normal. But if you fall behind, you die."

Razen's voice came from behind, icy:
"Stop talking. Sounds carry."

Eline lowered her head.
(Eline's inner voice: "These men… are really hunting those above. And I'm among them. If my aura leaks…")

A while later they reached the mouth of the mine. The entrance was half-collapsed, held up with wooden supports. A faint blue light leaked from inside.

Kael extinguished the torch.
"The plan is simple. Deer and I from the left, Luna will create a distraction from the right. Razen… you use the ceiling. Eline, you stay at the very back. If anyone escapes, guide them. Don't draw a weapon; just shout."

Eline nodded rapidly.
"O-okay, red-haired lord… I'll stay quiet as a mouse."

They slipped inside.

The tunnel was narrow and damp. There were traces of old runes on the walls, pieces of chain on the ground, and dried bloodstains. As they advanced, human whispers, the clinking of chains, and low command voices began to be heard.

Kael gave a stop sign with his hand.
Ahead, a wide chamber opened. In the center were iron cages containing tired and frightened people. Black-armored guards and two robed mages with blue lights were moving around. At the base of the wall stood an old, cracked teleportation gate; its runes still trembled weakly.

Deer clenched his teeth.
"Bonebreakers…"

The attack began suddenly.

Deer charged from the left with his twin swords, slicing through the first guard's armor. Kael threw a smoke bomb; mist filled the area. Luna struck her staff into the ground and sent a wave of wind; two guards lost their balance and tumbled to the ground.

Eline was at the very back, pressed against the wall, trembling.
(Eline's inner voice: "This… this is real. They've caged people. My mother… the Council… lied.")

Just then a bandit burst from the mist. His face scarred, a rusty scimitar in his hand. He headed straight for Eline.

"Little mouse! Did you come with the guild dogs?!"

Eline tried to flee backward but her back hit the wall. The scimitar swung through the air.

"No—!"

In the moment of panic, something leaked from the depths of her sealed body.
A thin, pure, almost invisible aura… belonging to Above, suppressed but still noble in its glow.

The moment the scimitar was about to land on Eline's shoulder, it turned to dust. Metal particles scattered in the air; the bandit staggered backward in surprise.

"What—?!"

Kael shouted through the mist:
"Luna! Was that explosion yours?!"

Luna answered out of breath while swinging her staff:
"I… I didn't do anything that strong!"

At that exact moment the ceiling of the tunnel split with a roar. As stone and dust rained down, a silhouette descended like a blue lightning bolt.

Razen.

Curved sword in hand, turban slightly slipped, eyes sharp. When he landed he made no sound. With his first move he took down two guards at once. His sword swung leaving a blue trail; every cut was precise and without wasted power.

Deer looked at him and gave a short nod of approval.
"You're late."

Razen did not answer. He simply continued fighting.

But his eye drifted to Eline for a moment.
The thin aura still dispersing in the tunnel… its purity, its density, that sharpness unique to Above. Razen's gaze lingered on Eline for one more second. Then, without showing any reaction, he turned his sword and directed it at the next guard.

(Eline's inner voice: "He noticed… That man noticed. But he said nothing. Why?")

The clash was short. One of the mages tried to flee when Deer's sword sank into his back. Kael caught the other by the throat and laid him low. The locks of the cages were broken; the frightened people began to come out.

Kael, out of breath, looked around.
"Cleared. Check the gate."

Razen approached the teleportation gate. He looked at the runes, then scratched one with the tip of his sword. The light went out.

"Closed."

Luna ran to Eline's side.
"Are you all right?! That man attacked you, then the weapon… turned to dust!"

Eline was still trembling.
"I-I… don't know, sister. Maybe… maybe your magic reflected."

Kael approached them; his gaze was suspicious, but for now he only asked:
"Is anyone injured?"

Deer spoke while wiping his swords:
"One more Bonebreaker nest closed. Not enough, but… a beginning."

Razen sheathed his sword. He turned to the team; his voice was as distant as always, but this time a little clearer:
"I will continue walking with you. This team… has potential."

Luna looked in surprise:
"So… are you officially joining?!"

Razen adjusted his turban.
"For now. We'll see the road together."

Kael smiled slightly, pulled out his notebook, and put a mark next to Razen's name.
"We're five. Officially."

Eline stood in the background, clenching her hands tightly into fists.
(Eline's inner voice: "Razen… he felt that aura. But he stayed silent. This is either very dangerous… or it will be very useful to me. The game continues. But now I have to be more careful.")

When they came out of the tunnel the night was still dark. As the rescued people slowly dispersed, the team walked side by side.

Five shadows.
One of them was still lying.

…

Beyond the sky, the massive castle rising above the clouds and the stars… White marbles glowed faintly with magical light veins worked into them; crystal columns and gold-embellished arches displayed a splendor that the mortal world could not even imagine.

In the highest council hall of the castle the air was ice-cold.

Eline's mother was pacing the middle of the hall, her gold-embellished dress trailing. The expression on her face had lost its usual cold pride and given way to sharp anger. The crystal tablet in her hand was trembling as if it would break.

“Missing… My daughter is missing!” she cried in fury. “They just brought the sabotage report from the teleportation chamber. The security core was deliberately damaged. And those stupid guards are still saying ‘unauthorized passage was blocked’!”

The low-ranking advisor opposite her spoke while bowing:
“My lady… Council approval is required for a search order. However, in today’s session the ‘Resource Quota’ and productivity discussions in the eastern regions take priority. Your order… must be postponed.”

The mother’s eyes narrowed.
“Must be postponed?! My daughter is missing below, among those barbarians, and you tell me postponed?!”

The advisor bowed even lower.
“This is the Council’s decision, my lady. Especially… it was supported by the other members of your family.”

The mother’s hand tightly gripped the crystal tablet. She hurled it onto the marble floor and shattered it.
“Enough! I’m going down myself. I’ll find my daughter and bring her back. I can’t endure this nonsense any longer!”

Just as she was about to take a step toward the teleportation chamber, the massive doors of the hall slowly opened.

The man who entered walked with silent but heavy steps. The navy and silver-embellished robe on him, the six-armed symbol on his shoulders… Eline’s father.

As the man approached his wife, his voice came out calm, almost tired:
“Enough. Stop.”

The mother turned around in anger:
“Stop?! Our daughter is below! Her power may be sealed, she may have fallen into the hands of those lowlifes, and you tell me ‘stop’?!”

The father took a few more steps closer. His eyes kept their calm despite his wife’s anger.
“Leave it. Our daughter is strong. Nothing will happen to her.”

The mother looked in disbelief.
“Strong? That child is still rebellious and naïve! You know how dangerous those below are. The people they abduct for the resource quota, those tunnels…”

The father raised his hand and cut her off. A slight hardness entered his voice:
“Eline is of our blood. She comes from the lineage of the gods. Even if sealed, that aura does not completely disappear. And if something really happens… we will feel it anyway.”

The mother’s voice trembled, this time more with worry than anger:

“Are you… are you willing to leave her below? Are we sacrificing our own daughter right in front of the Council’s eyes?”

The father looked at his wife’s face. For a moment something passed across his expression—regret? calculation? it was unclear. Then he touched the six-armed symbol on his shoulders.

“No. We are not sacrificing. We are only… leaving it to time. The search order was postponed because the Council wants to see whether Eline can stand on her own feet. And I… believe our daughter will succeed.”

The mother clenched her teeth.
“You believe. I, on the other hand, will bring her back. Whether the Council approves or not.”

The father gently but firmly held his wife’s arm.
“Not now. If you take a step, the Council will hold you responsible as well. Then, never mind saving Eline—we could even lose our own position.”

The hall sank back into silence. Outside the stars; below, the dark world under the clouds stretched out.

The mother slowly pulled her husband’s hand away. Her voice was now barely above a whisper:
“If anything happens to her… this time I won’t forgive you either.”

The father did not answer. He only looked down from the high windows of the castle, at that distant and dirty world.

“Nothing will happen to her,” he repeated, this time in a lower voice.
“Because she… is our daughter.”

But in his eyes, for the first time, a slight doubt had appeared.

…

When they came out of the tunnel the night was still dark, but a faint gray had appeared on the eastern horizon. The rescued people had slowly dispersed; some had stayed behind to thank them. Kael gently sent them away.

“Go. Don’t talk. Forget this night.”

The return to the guild was short and silent. The guild master frowned while listening to the report, then held out the pouch.

“Clean work. The gate is closed, the guards cleaned. Your reward is here. Keep a low profile for a while… the Ones Above will notice this loss.”

Deer murmured in a low voice as he took the money:

“Let them notice. We destroyed one more nest.”

Razen said nothing. He only gave the team a short look and went outside.

As the first light of morning fell on the streets, Kael stopped the team.
“Money and rest later. Now we’re going to the training ground. What we saw tonight… showed that we need to be more prepared next time.”

Luna complained while yawning:
“Kael, our eyes haven’t even opened yet…”

“They will. Walk.”

The training ground was an old stone quarry just outside the walls. Surrounded on three sides by high rocks, the center a flat and wide pit. No one came; the sound didn’t carry much either.

As the sun was just rising, five people stood in the middle of the pit.

Kael stepped into the center.
“Today we will teach each other. We will cover our weak points. Luna, you will work on magic control. Deer, close combat and defense. Razen… sword technique. Me, strategy and ambush. Eline…”

Eline started.
“M-me?”

“You too. At least you’ll learn to run and not fall. If you don’t want to be a burden.”

(Eline’s inner voice: “A burden… Still that word. But… maybe I really need to learn something. My power is sealed. I have no other choice to survive here.”)

The first round began with Deer.
Without drawing his twin swords, using only body movements, he showed Luna and Eline the basic stances. “Put your weight on the back. Don’t lock your knees. You should already have shifted before the opponent makes a move.”

Luna stumbled a few times, laughed, then corrected herself. Eline, however, staggered with every step. The torn hems of her silk dress tangled around her feet; she couldn’t find her balance.

“I fell again…” she murmured.

Deer looked at her; his voice was hard but patient:
“Falling is normal. Learn to get up.”

Razen was waiting on the side without drawing his sword. When his turn came he stepped into the center.

“A sword is drawn to kill. But first the feet. If the feet are wrong, the sword is useless.”

He showed Kael and Deer a few basic steps. His movements were so fluid that not even dust rose. While Luna watched in admiration, Eline silently tried to imitate. On the first try she collapsed to the ground again.

(Eline’s inner voice: “What a disgrace… I didn’t struggle this much even in dance lessons Above. But… my feet seem to be slowly listening.”)

Toward noon Kael conducted a strategy exercise. He drew a sketch on the stones and explained possible ambush points.
“If the enemy outnumbers you, don’t clash head-on. Distract, separate, take them down one by one.”

Luna tried more controlled wind shields instead of fireballs. The spells that scattered at first slowly began to take shape.
“Look, Kael! It didn’t explode this time!”

Kael smiled slightly.
“There’s progress.”

Eline was sitting on the side, hugging her knees, watching them. From time to time she stood up and repeated the steps Deer had shown on her own. She was still clumsy, but now she got up immediately after every fall. The exaggerated fear expression on her face was gradually giving way to quiet concentration.

At one point Razen approached her side. His voice was low:
“Your feet are still heavy. But your shoulders… aren’t as tense as before.”

Eline lifted her head, surprised.
“Y-you… noticed?”

Razen did not answer. He only adjusted his turban and returned to the group.

When training ended toward evening, all of them were tired. Luna was lying on the ground, Deer was cleaning his swords, Kael was taking notes in his notebook. Razen was sitting on a rock, looking into the distance.

Eline stood up and shook out her skirts. This time she did not stagger.
(Eline’s inner voice: “I’m still powerless. But… this earth, these people… my feet are slowly getting used to it. Maybe I’m not as weak as my mother said.”)

Kael closed his notebook.
“We’re here again tomorrow. This time it will be harder.”

Luna shouted from the ground:
“Tomorrow?! Kael, a little mercy!”

Deer laughed in a low voice.
“There’s no mercy. The Bonebreakers don’t show mercy either.”

Razen stood up.
“Come early tomorrow morning. We’ll start with footwork.”

Eline nodded silently.
This time she did not say “I’ll stay quiet as a mouse.”
She only, slowly, controlling her own steps, joined the group.

As the five people left the stone quarry and walked toward the city, the sun had begun to set. Eline was at the back, but no longer completely behind… she was walking a little closer.

…

The next day’s training had been harder than the previous one.
Razen had ruthlessly repeated the footwork, Deer had laid Luna low multiple times in close combat, and Kael had constantly warned “You’re slow. You’ll die.” Eline was still at the very back, but now she got up immediately after every fall, clenched her teeth, and tried again.

Toward noon Kael ended the training.
“Enough. That’s it for today. Luna, Eline… you two go to the market. Buy potion ingredients and food. We’ll be at the inn.”

Luna cheerfully threw her staff over her shoulder.
“Finally! Eline, come on. I’ll show you the best apple stall in the Lower City.”

Eline nodded.
(Eline’s inner voice: “The market… At least for a while I’ll be away from those three’s sharp gazes.”)

…

The market of the Lower City was as crowded and noisy as always. Merchants were shouting, children running between the cart wheels, the smell of fried bread and spices mixing in the air.

Luna had linked arms with Eline and was cheerfully browsing the stalls.
“Look, that man’s honey is really good. And that cloth seller over there… cheap but durable. We can look for something for that torn dress of yours.”

Eline tried not to wrinkle her face while touching the fabrics.
(Eline’s inner voice: “These fabrics… coarser than even the aprons of the servants in my castle. But… at least the touch is honest.”)

“Thank you, sister,” she said slowly. “But there’s no need. I… am used to it.”

Luna stopped and looked at her.

“Are you really used to it? Or have you just gotten used to saying it?”

Eline fell silent for a moment. Then she shrugged, this time in an unexaggerated voice:
“Maybe both.”

Luna smiled, with a softer expression:
“You know… when you came the team changed a little. Kael is still suspicious, Deer doesn’t talk, and Razen is… well, Razen. But in my opinion you’re not bad. At least you don’t fall every two steps anymore.”

Eline smiled slightly. This time it wasn’t forced.
“I’m trying.”

While the two girls stood in front of the apple stall, Luna suddenly asked seriously:
“Don’t you really want to return to your village? Or… do you want to stay here?”

Eline turned the apple in her hand.
(Eline’s inner voice: “I have no village. And a place to return to… I’m no longer sure.”)

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “For now… being with you is easier.”

Luna nodded and asked no more questions. She simply bought two apples and held one out to Eline.
“Then for now you’re with us. Enjoy.”

…

The table in the farthest corner of the inn was away from the noise and dim. Kael was leaning against the wall; Deer opposite him was polishing the hilts of his swords. Razen was sitting by the window, turning the tip of his turban between his fingers.

Kael spoke in a low voice:
“Yesterday’s tunnel… was clean. But it was too easy. The Ones Above wouldn’t leave that gate so weak.”

Deer lifted his head.
“Maybe a trap. Or maybe they really don’t care. As worthless as ‘resources’ are to us, we are that worthless to them.”

Razen cut in for the first time. His voice was as distant as always, but this time a little clearer:
“I felt something in the tunnel. An aura… pure and suppressed. Belonging to Above.”

Kael’s eyes narrowed.
“One of the mages?”

“No.” Razen looked out the window. “More… different. Cleaner. And very close.”

Deer slowly straightened.
“Are you saying Eline?”

Razen did not answer. He only adjusted his turban.

Kael tapped his fingers on the table.
“I’m suspicious too. Her clothes, her speech, the way that weapon turned to dust yesterday… It wasn’t Luna’s magic. I know. But I don’t have proof yet. And if we declare her an enemy right now, the team falls apart.”

Deer asked in a low voice:
“And if she really is one of them?”

Kael fixed his eyes on Deer.
“Then we keep her with us. Knowing the enemy up close… is sometimes the best weapon.”

Razen stood up.
“For now I’m watching. But if that aura leaks again… I won’t stay silent.”

Kael nodded.
“Understood. Don’t say anything to Luna and Eline. Especially Luna. The girl is still naïve.”

Deer fastened his swords to his waist.
“Even if she’s the daughter of the Bonebreakers… if she’s walking with us, let her walk a while longer. Then we’ll decide.”

As Razen walked toward the door he left one last sentence:
“Let her walk. But my eye is on her.”

When the door closed, Kael took a deep breath as if alone. He pulled out his notebook and put a small question mark next to Eline’s name.

…

When evening came, Luna and Eline joined them at the inn. They had come with apples, bread, and a few bottles of potion. While Luna cheerfully described the shopping, Eline sat quietly in the corner.

The gazes of Kael, Deer, and Razen shifted to her for a moment.
Then everyone continued acting as if everything were normal.

As Eline bit into the apple in her hand she thought:
(Eline’s inner voice: “Something has changed. Their gazes… are heavier. Especially that turbaned one. Did they notice? Or is it only suspicion?”)

As night slowly settled outside, five people sat in the dim corner of the inn.
One was still lying.
The other three had now begun to listen.

Chapter 5: The News

After returning from the training ground and the market, the team went straight to the Shadow Guild. The interior was a little emptier than its usual crowd. The bearded man behind the counter nodded upward when he saw them.

“Aruze is waiting for you. Upper floor.”

Kael frowned but did not object. The five of them climbed the stairs and stopped in front of the heavy wooden door. The door was already ajar.

Aruze was sitting behind the desk in her usual neatly cut guild uniform. In her hand was a sealed parchment. When she saw them she smiled slightly, but this time her smile was more serious.

“Come in. Sit… or stand, it doesn’t matter. You need to see this.”

The document she slid toward the desk was an old parchment wrinkled by dampness. On it were fine runes unique to the Ones Above and a cold, official writing style.

Kael stepped forward and took the document. As his eyes moved between the lines, his expression slowly hardened.

First came the numerical losses.

*“Eastern Sector – Period 3 Yield Report:
Total units processed: 4,872
Loss rate: 17.3% (death)
Efficiency: at an acceptable level.
Note: In cases where those below showed resistance, rapid liquidation was preferred. Their individual value is at a negligible level.”*

Kael’s jaw tightened. Deer clenched his teeth as he read over his shoulder. Luna’s hand went to her mouth. Razen simply listened without saying anything.

Eline stood at the very back.
(Eline’s inner voice: “Units… Loss rate… They… we… I… were we counting people as ‘units’?!”)

Kael turned the page. Lower down there was a more technical and urgent note:

*“Seal Status – Observation Record:
Current suppression rate: 84%
Process ongoing.
Warning: If the rate falls below 90%, the probability of the ‘Entity’ awakening will reach critical levels.
The Entity has the capacity to destroy both planes (Below and Above).
Resource transfer is mandatory to close the seal.
Continuation expected.”*

Kael slowly placed the document on the desk. A long silence settled over the room.

Deer was the first to speak. His voice was icy:
“The Bonebreakers… wrote thousands of people down as ‘losses.’ And they were doing it… to close a seal.”

Luna’s voice trembled:
“So… if those people hadn’t died… something would have woken up? Something that would destroy both us and them?”

Aruze nodded.
“The document came out of the tunnel. We separated it from the loot you brought. It’s not fake. The runes and seals match.”

Kael pressed his fingers onto the desk.
“Both sides are right in their own way. They’re burning us to close the seal. We’re declaring war on them so we won’t be burned. And in the middle… there’s an entity that can end both worlds.”

Razen cut in for the first time. His voice was low:
“The seal is at 84%. Time is running short.”

Eline was leaning against the wall, her fingers trembling slightly.
(Eline’s inner voice: “My mother… my father… the Council… they all knew. That thing they called the ‘resource quota’ was this. They were using people like fuel. And I… I was part of that system. Now I’m standing beside the ones who died to protect that seal.”)

Kael took the document in his hand again and carefully folded it.
“No one outside the guild must hear this information. For now. But we… can no longer just chase revenge. We need to learn what the seal is, what that entity is.”

Deer pressed on the hilts of his swords.
“We will learn. Then we will decide. We don’t have to accept the Bonebreakers’ method.”

Luna looked at Eline; her voice was soft:
“Eline… are you all right? You look… very pale.”

Eline forced a smile.
“I-I… just… the numbers… were a bit too much.”

Razen’s gaze lingered on Eline for a moment. Then he slowly turned it elsewhere.

Aruze leaned back in her chair.
“Keep the document. I didn’t make a copy. Decide what you’ll do yourselves. But I wanted you to know… because your next mission may be related to this seal.”

Kael tucked the document inside his coat.
“Thank you, Aruze.”

As the five left the room, no one was speaking.
In the dimness of the corridor only the sound of their footsteps could be heard.

Eline walked at the very back, fists clenched.
(Eline’s inner voice: “84%… Continuation expected. If the seal breaks, both of us will be destroyed. But they’re doing this by writing thousands of people down as ‘losses.’ I… no longer even know which side I’m on.”)

As evening slowly settled outside, the door of the Shadow Guild closed heavily behind them.

The news was now in their hands.
And the news had begun to change everything.

…

After leaving the guild, Kael changed direction.
“Not to the inn. We’re going to the library.”

Luna looked in surprise:
“At this hour? Won’t it be closed?”

“The old library of the Lower City is open at night too. As long as you give the doorkeeper two silvers.”

The door of the half-ruined stone building at the base of the walls was ajar. Inside it was damp, dusty, and dim. The shelves were filled to the ceiling with stacks of old parchments, books, and maps. A few gas lamps were burning.

Kael placed the document they had taken from Aruze on the table.
“Don’t search randomly. Seal, entity, suppression, resource transfer… search for these words. Bring whatever you find to the table.”

Hours passed.
Among the dusty shelves only the rustling of parchments and occasional coughs could be heard.

Deer was the first to find something. He placed a thick, worn scroll on the table.
“An old war record. From the Age of War.”

Kael opened it. The writing was in an old language, but the meaning was clear:

“Those who descended from the sky demanded the first sacrifices to close the ‘Seal.’ We did not give them. They took them. Thousands of lives… they called them ‘resources.’ They said if the seal does not close, ‘It’ will awaken. The one that will swallow both above and below.”

Deer underlined the line with his finger.
“They knew from the very beginning. They called us barbarians and broke our bones.”

A little later Luna came with two separate parchments. Her face was both excited and uneasy.
“I found them on the rearmost shelf, among the dust.”

The first parchment was technical:

*“Suppression Rate Calculation – Observation Note
90% and above: Safe
80–90%: Critical threshold
Below 80%: The Entity’s conscious stirrings begin.
Note: As resource quality decreases, the rate declines rapidly. The ‘resistant’ individuals among those below produce more efficient results.”*

The second parchment was more personal:

*“Note exclusive to the Council:

Completely closing the seal does not appear possible. We can only postpone it. Each generation requires more resources. If those below realize, rebellion is inevitable.
But if the seal breaks… nothing will remain. Neither our throne, nor our blood, nor the sky. The end of both worlds."*

They all spread the parchments in the middle of the table. The flickering light of the gas lamp danced over the old writings.

Kael leaned back in his chair.
"Let's summarize. The Ones Above are suppressing an 'Entity' with a seal. This seal is fed by human lives. If the rate drops, the entity awakens and destroys both sides. They're using us as fuel. We're attacking them so we won't be burned."

Deer slammed his fist on the table.
"So you're saying they're right?"

"No," Kael said sharply. "I never find their methods justified. But I see the situation. This work won't end with revenge alone. If we don't learn the true nature of the seal and the entity, either they destroy us, or the seal breaks and we all go."

Luna took one of the parchments in her hand; her voice had lowered:
"What if there's another way to feed the seal? Without killing people?"

Razen was standing in the shadows.
"Even if there is, the Ones Above rejected that path long ago. Because this is the easiest and cheapest method."

Eline was at the edge of the table, looking at the parchments. Her fingers were no longer trembling. Everything was simply… very heavy.
(Eline's inner voice: "These appear in the reports as 'efficiency.' In the halls I grew up in, at the dinner tables, even in my mother's whispers before sleep… these numbers were always there. I simply didn't want to hear them.")

Kael gave Eline a short look, then turned to the others.
"We're staying here tonight. Tomorrow we'll go deeper into older records. Seal runes, entity legends… whatever there is. We're no longer dealing only with them, but with the end of both worlds."

Deer slowly rolled up the parchment.
"Then continue. I won't sleep."

Luna, yawning but determined:
"Me too. Maybe there's a third thing."

Razen walked toward the shelves.
"I'll look at the old languages."

Eline did not get up from her place. She continued looking at the writings on the table. As the light of the gas lamp fell on her face, the village girl role seemed to have completely fallen for a moment.

She was simply silent, like someone sitting opposite a heavy truth.

Among the dusty shelves of the library, five people spent the night reading about the seal and annihilation.
Every new line showed that the war was now far greater than before.

...

The next morning, when the team left the library, the sky was still gray. Kael opened the map and pressed his finger on the mountainous region to the west.

“There’s a monk here. He’s said to be the person who knows the records of the old Age of War best. We’ll ask about the seal.”

Deer threw his backpack over his shoulder.
“How long will it take?”

“On foot… five days.”

Luna sighed but did not object. Razen was already ready. Eline only nodded and moved to the very back.

The road was truly long.

The first days passed on the plains. As the wind licked the steppe, conversations decreased; only the sound of footsteps and the occasional rising wind remained. On the third day the forests began; damp earth, the smell of swamp, silent waits around the night fire. On the fourth day the slopes grew steeper. Rocky paths, thin but persistent rain, slippery stones… In the afternoon of the fifth day, the small stone monastery on the mountainside finally came into view.

The door was open. From inside came the smell of incense and old wood.

The monk met them in the courtyard. His hair was pure white, his back slightly hunched, but his eyes clear and sharp. When the staff in his hand struck the ground it made a solid sound.

“Those who come from the Shadow Guild… and a stranger. Have you come for the seal?”

Kael stepped forward.
“Yes. We want to learn what you know.”

The monk tilted his head slightly.
“Then first the test. Not with words. With the body.”

A young man emerged from one side of the courtyard. One of the monk's students; simply dressed, a wooden bo staff in his hand. His face calm, his stance balanced.

"Not all five of you at once," the monk said. "One by one. Or together. It doesn't matter. Put him on the ground. If you can't… the door closes."

No one stepped back.

Deer went first. Without drawing his twin swords, he approached using only body movements. When the student swung the staff, Deer slid inside, caught his wrist, but the young man turned without losing his balance and pushed Deer from the shoulder. Deer fell two steps back, clenched his teeth, and attacked again. This time he was more cautious. After three moves he trapped the student's staff under his arm and toppled him to the ground.

The monk nodded.
"Passed."

It was Luna's turn. She struck her staff into the ground and sent a wave of wind. The student split the wave with his staff and approached quickly. While Luna fled backward in panic her foot slipped, but at the last moment she flung a small stone from the ground with her staff. The stone touched the student's forehead; the man staggered for a moment. Luna did not miss that opening and pressed the tip of her staff against his chest.

"Passed," the monk said again.

Kael approached without using a smoke bomb, only with his short sword and footwork. As the student swung the staff, Kael kept his distance and patiently looked for an opening. In the end, at a moment when the student put his weight wrong, he tripped him and took the staff from his hand.

Razen's turn was the shortest. He did not even draw his sword from its scabbard. When the student made a move, Razen simply shifted one step to the side and lightly struck his wrist. The staff fell to the ground. The student looked in surprise. Razen withdrew.

Finally Eline stepped forward. Her hands were empty. The student looked at her, seemed as if he would not lower his staff, but still attacked. Eline fled backward in panic, her foot caught, and she fell to the ground. The student stopped without lowering the staff. Eline was out of breath on the ground, then clenched her teeth and stood up. This time she did not run. She barely slipped sideways past the student's move, pushed the tip of the staff with her hand, and shoved the unbalanced man from the shoulder, toppling him to the ground.

The monk looked for a long time.
"You passed. All of you."

They moved from the courtyard to the innermost room of the monastery. The walls were covered with old paintings: silhouettes descending from the sky, bodies lying on the ground, two different armies standing side by side…

The monk sat.
“Almost everything that has been told to you is a story turned upside down.”

He began to speak.

In the Age of War, those who descended from the sky were truly fleeing a great catastrophe. But the thing they called the “Entity” was a weapon they themselves had created. They lost control of it. Those below spilled blood to stop that weapon. The Ones Above, to cover their defeat and fear, invented the “seal” lie. By burning people as “resources” they both controlled the population and kept the fear alive. As those below rebelled, the threat that “the seal will break” grew. As the Ones Above divided among themselves, the lie deepened further.

The seal… never existed.
There was only a control mechanism that was constantly fed.

When the monk finished speaking, the room sank into silence.

Luna whispered:
“All these deaths… were they in vain?”

“Not in vain,” the monk said. “They were paid to keep the lie standing. They are still being paid.”

Kael stood up.
“Is there proof?”

The monk pulled a thin scroll from the shelves. On it were writings in both the language of above and below.
“One of the true records of the Age of War. One of the rare copies that both sides tried to destroy. Take it.”

The team took the scroll.
The monk escorted them to the door.
“Your road is long. Now you also carry the weight of the lie.”

The return was heavier than the journey there.
Another five days. Plains, forests, rocks… Conversations almost ceased. Everyone was rearranging something inside themselves.

When they arrived in the city, evening had settled. They stopped in front of the guild.

Kael tucked the scroll inside his coat.
“Disperse for tonight. We’ll meet at the inn tomorrow. Don’t tell anyone anything. Yet.”

Deer nodded and disappeared into the side streets.
Razen walked in the opposite direction.
Luna briefly touched Eline’s arm, then went her own way.

Eline remained alone for a while.
Then she slowly, controlling her steps, began walking toward the inn.

The seal was not real.
And this knowledge was more dangerous than anything.

Chapter 6: The Sacrifice List

Beyond the sky, in that white marble castle where even the stars remained below, the doors of the Council Hall slowly opened.

The hall rose with a grandeur that no mortal architect could even imagine. The crystal dome whose ceiling could not be seen glowed gently with the starlight trapped inside it. The golden runes on the floor swallowed the footsteps of everyone who stepped on them. Around the hexagonal table in the center there were six high seats. Behind each seat hung the symbol belonging to that seat: Sun, Moon, Sword, Leaf, Eye, and Star.

The air was heavy. The scents of lavender and cold metal mixed together.

First **Seraphinas** entered.

Her long, golden-blonde hair fell over her shoulders; the solar halo slowly rotating around her head illuminated the hall. Her dress in white and gold tones scattered light as she moved. Her face was calm, her gaze of an almost merciless clarity. The moment she sat, the temperature of the air rose by a degree.

Behind her came **Lunarias**.

Her silvery hair, almost white, reached down to her waist. The crescent-shaped crown on her head was in perfect harmony with her dark blue and gold-embellished dress. The transparent cloak hanging from her shoulders sparkled like stardust. Her eyes were half-closed, her expression distant and cold. When she sat, the lights of the hall dimmed slightly; as if the shadow of the moon had drifted inside.

Third, **Vaelor** stepped in.

Broad-shouldered, white-haired, the warrior with a red cloak leaving his chest bare entered the hall by lightly striking the ground with the massive spear in his hand. The golden armor pieces on his shoulder clinked lightly with every step. His face was hard, his jaw tight. When he sat in his seat he leaned the spear beside him. His gaze fixed directly on the center of the table; as if he were ready to give an order even though no one had spoken yet.

Elyndras settled into the fourth seat.

Her green hair fell over her shoulders; thin branches and leaves hung from the antler-like horns on her head. Her dress in white and green tones was fluid like nature itself. Her face appeared elegant and composed as always… but the slight shadows under her eyes betrayed the sleeplessness of recent days. As she sat, her fingers tightly gripped the edge of the seat.

Fifth, **Morrigan** drifted into the hall.

Her long, pure-white hair was hidden under her black cloak. The staff in her hand carried a large, open eye motif at its tip. Her black and gold-embellished robe was heavy and silent like death itself. When she sat, a thin coldness spread through the hall. No one dared to make eye contact with her.

Finally **Caelion** entered.

His dark blue hair was slightly disheveled. The navy and white dress on him was embroidered with star motifs. The cloak on his shoulders waved like the night sky. His face was young but his gaze old. The thin star halo on his head slowly rotated. As he sat in his seat he placed his hand on the table and smiled briefly. The smile was not sincere; it was only a formality.

The Six Great Heads had taken their places around the hexagonal table.

The hall sank back into silence.

The light filtering from the crystal dome fell into the empty space in the center of the table. There stood a sealed crystal tablet that had not yet been opened. Fine runes trembled on it; its contents were not yet shown to anyone.

Seraphinas was the first to speak. Her voice was soft but clear:

“The Council has convened.”

Lunarias half-opened her eyes:

“The agenda is long.”

Vaelor lightly struck the shaft of his spear:

“Let the order of priority be clear.”

Elyndras said nothing. She only looked at the tablet in the center of the table. Her fingers were still gripping the seat.

A low whisper rose from under Morrigan’s veil:

“Some things… cannot be postponed.”

Caelion tilted his head slightly:

“Then let us begin.”

Not even the wind was blowing in the corridors outside the hall.
The heavy silence of the hall was first broken by the green-haired woman.

Elyndras released the edge of her seat. Her fingers still trembled slightly, but her voice came out clear and controlled as always:

“I must bring news to the Council.”

Everyone turned to her. While Seraphinas’s solar halo slowly rotated, Lunarias fully opened her eyes. Vaelor leaned on his spear. Caelion leaned slightly forward.

Elyndras took a deep breath.

“I have received news… from my daughter.”

She paused for a moment. Choosing her words carefully, she continued:

“My daughter has long kept the child she has hidden from the Council’s eyes… my grandchild… down Below. More precisely, my grandchild fled below of her own will. The sabotage in the teleportation chamber was hers. Her powers are sealed. She is currently alone in the mortal world.”

The hall froze once more.

Morrigan asked in a low and sharp voice from under her veil:

“Elyndra Lunethra?”

Elyndras tilted her head slightly. The shadow in her eyes darkened for a moment.

“Yes.
We usually call her… Eline for short.”

The name echoed under the crystal dome.

Seraphinas’s fingers tightened on the shaft of her staff. Lunarias’s crescent crown trembled slightly. Vaelor’s jaw tightened. Caelion said nothing and only looked at the sealed tablet in the center of the table.

Elyndras continued, her voice lower this time:

“My daughter wanted to protect her. I also… remained silent for a while. But silence can no longer be maintained. My grandchild is Below. And if someone among the living notices her aura…”

She did not finish the sentence.

The eye at the tip of Morrigan’s staff slowly blinked.

“Elyndra Lunethra… a child carrying the blood of the Six Great Heads is wandering among the barbarians in a sealed state.”

The light of the hall dimmed even further for a moment.

Morrigan cut in with a low and icy voice from under her veil.

“This seems to me… like a personal matter.”

The eye at the tip of her staff slowly blinked. She let her gaze roam over everyone in turn.

“The Council’s time should not be spent on family concerns. Let us close the subject.”

Elyndras turned her head quickly. The tension in her voice was clearly audible for the first time:

“Personal?
One of our blood… a child from the lineage of the Six Great Heads is wandering Below in a sealed state. We do not know what she will do, whom she will speak to, what she will learn. This is not personal. This is… a risk.”

Morrigan did not even shrug. She only exhaled a cold breath from under her veil:

“If the humans lead her astray…
I will not hesitate in the slightest to write the death warrant for your grandchild.”

The hall completely froze for a moment.

Elyndras sprang to her feet. As her green hair swirled over her shoulders, her voice filled the hall:

“This is a disrespect!
You cannot speak of a death warrant against our own blood, Morrigan!”

Seraphinas raised her hand. The solar halo flashed for a moment and spread a warm but authoritative light through the hall.

“Enough.”

Her voice was calm but definitive.

“Sit, Elyndras.”

Elyndras sat back in her place, clenching her teeth. Her fingers were still trembling.

Lunarias spoke slowly. As her crescent crown rotated slightly, her voice was distant and measured:

“Morrigan is as right as… Elyndras is not wrong.
No matter how long a child from the lineage of a Great Head remains Below, she leaves a mark. Either she becomes an opportunity for us… or a disaster.”

Vaelor lightly struck his spear on the table.

“I will speak clearly.
Bringing her back is the cleanest solution. But if we refuse to bring her back… then surveillance is mandatory. If her aura leaks, if she becomes the center of a rebellion, then let Morrigan’s warrant be ready.”

Caelion spoke at length for the first time. As his star halo slowly rotated, his gaze had drifted to the tablet in the center of the table:

“I see something else.
The grandchild… may be exactly what we need.
Those below are panicking with the fake documents. If ‘one of us’ is walking among them… and if that child one day sees the truths… perhaps we can keep the lie standing longer.
Or… she completely destroys the lie.
Both are possible.”

Seraphinas took a deep breath. The sun disk at the tip of her staff trembled slightly.

“Let us decide.”

For a while no one spoke. Only the light filtering from the crystal dome danced on the faces of the six gods.

Finally Seraphinas spoke:

“Three decisions.”

She began counting by striking the table with her finger:

“One: Elyndra Lunethra — Eline — will not be brought back. For now.
She will be watched. The moment her aura leaks, the nearest unit will move.

Two: The fake documents seized in the main tunnel… will not be given importance.
No matter how much those below panic, the ‘seal’ lie is still working. New documents will be prepared, more persuasive ones if necessary.

Three:
If the grandchild acts against us alongside those Below…
Morrigan’s warrant will be valid.
Blood ties do not forgive betrayal.”

Elyndras’s face turned pure white for a moment. But she did not object.

Morrigan approved with a short nod from under her veil.

Vaelor leaned his spear on his shoulder.

Lunarias half-closed her eyes.

Caelion smiled silently. The smile was again not sincere.

Seraphinas stood up. The solar halo illuminated the hall once more.

“The Council is dissolved.
The Sacrifice List… is left to the next session.”

The Six Great Heads began leaving the hall one by one.

Elyndras remained last.
She looked for a long time at the sealed tablet in the center of the table.
Then she slowly turned her back and left, her green cloak trailing.

The hall emptied again.
Under the crystal dome, the weight of the list that had not yet been opened continued to wait silently.

…

Night had settled over one of the deepest and quietest inns of the Lower City.

Outside a fine rain was falling; the sound of water accumulating on the stone streets struck the windows. In the rearmost room of the inn, thick curtains were drawn, and only a single gas lamp was burning. Four people sat around the table.

The man in the center was not the owner of the Shadow Guild.
Nor was he the leader of the Iron Fist, the Crimson Swords, or any of the other known guilds.
These were… older, more secret, dirtier names. The true gang leaders of the Lower City.
Men who had ruled their own people for years under the pretext of “protection.”

The fifth chair opposite them was not empty.

Vaelor was sitting.

His red cloak hung from his shoulder; his spear leaned against the side of the table. The golden armor pieces on him shone coldly in the flickering light of the gas lamp. His face was hard as always. In his eyes there was neither contempt nor anger; only calculation.

“The lists are ready,” Vaelor said in a low and clear voice. “This month’s quota… is a little high. Forty from the eastern district, thirty from the western edge. Children included. Those who show resistance take priority.”

The oldest of the gang leaders cleared his throat. There was a slight tremor in his voice:

“The quota rises every time, Great Head. The people… have begun to notice. The missing have increased. The guilds are asking questions.”

Vaelor lightly struck the table with his finger.

“The guilds are your problem.
If you want to keep your seats, you will fill the lists.
Otherwise… you will lose both your seats and your heads.
The choice is yours.”

The men looked at each other. No one objected.

The youngest one asked, clenching his teeth:

“The reward?”

Vaelor shrugged.

“The same.
Weapons, gold, and… ‘immunity.’
The eye of Above will not be on you.
And you will continue collecting ‘resources’ for us.”

The agreement was completed with a few signatures and a silent nod.
Vaelor stood up. He leaned his spear on his shoulder.
Before leaving through the door he left one last sentence:

“Next month… the quota will increase again.
Get used to it.”

…

The same night, a few streets away.

Kael had leaned his back against a wet wall, out of breath. The wet piece of paper in his hand was almost falling apart from the rain. Beside him Luna tightly gripped her staff, watching the surroundings with trembling hands.

“Kael…” Luna whispered. “What we just saw… was it real?”

Kael slowly folded the paper. His eyes were dark.

“Real.
The gang leaders… are selling their own people.
To Vaelor’s ‘sacrifice lists.’
To keep their seats.”

Luna’s breath caught.

“So…
The Ones Above are not only above.
They are beside us.
Among us.”

Kael lifted his head. His red hair, soaked by the rain, stuck to his forehead. His voice was low but sharp as a blade:

“The enemy is not only in the sky, Luna.
It is at our feet.
And we… have been walking among those who write names on their lists.”

A torch light appeared in the distance.
Both of them drew into the shadows.

Kael tucked the paper inside his coat.
His fingers were still trembling; but this time not from the cold.

“Tomorrow… we will tell everyone.
Deer, Razen, Eline…
We are no longer only fighting against Above.
We are also fighting our own city.”

Luna rested her staff on her shoulder. The cheer in her eyes had given way for the first time to an icy determination.

“Then…
It is time to tear up the list.”

The two shadows disappeared into the rain.
Behind them, the dirtiest secret of the Lower City remained stuck to the wet stones.

…

The rain had lightened in the afternoon, giving way to a fine drizzle. The stone streets of the Lower City were wet and slippery. In the small room of the inn Kael had spread five separate copies on the table. He had multiplied the list with his own hand, copying the signatures and Vaelor’s seal as clearly as possible. Under each copy he had added a small note:

“This month’s quota. Your own people are being sold. The names are real. The seal is real. You can no longer pretend not to know.”

Deer asked while checking his swords:

“Where will we distribute them?”

Kael folded the copies.

“Three main lines.
One: The small guilds under the Shadow Guild and the honest merchant unions. They are silent but afraid.
Two: The rival groups of the old ‘protection’ gangs in the eastern and western districts. We will fuel the competition.
Three: The large merchant inns in the market square. Money talks. If their goods are endangered they will make noise.”

Razen adjusted his turban.

“I’ll take the eastern side. I’ll walk silently.”

Deer nodded.

“The west is mine. There are familiar faces.”

Kael turned to Luna and Eline.

“You two the market and the southern districts. You’ll draw less suspicion. Don’t talk, just leave them. If anyone follows you, return immediately.”

Luna threw her staff over her shoulder; she was determined.

“All right. Eline, stay by my side. Don’t be left alone under any circumstances.”

Eline lowered her head. Her inner voice weighed heavily:

(Eline’s inner voice: “They’re multiplying the list. They’re showing Vaelor’s seal to the people. I… am the child of the lineage that carries that seal. And now I will distribute the copies. If someone notices the aura…”)

Outwardly her voice came out soft:

“O-okay, sister. I’ll be like a mouse.”

The five left the inn. Under the rain they dispersed in different directions.

Razen advanced like a shadow through the narrow side streets of the eastern district. When he reached the secret guild door behind an old warehouse, he left only two copies inside. One under the counter, the other behind the notice board on the wall. No one saw him. As he left he paused for a moment; he listened to the distant footsteps, then disappeared.

Deer moved more directly on the western side. He entered the inn of an old rival gang, left a copy on the table, and said only this in a low voice:

“Your own children’s names are on it. Read.”

When the innkeeper opened the paper and read it, his face turned pure white. Deer had already gone outside.

When Luna and Eline reached the market square, the sky had begun to darken. Stalls were closing; merchants were gathering their goods. Luna approached a large cloth seller’s stall and tucked the copy between a bolt of fabric. Eline waited a little behind, turning the apple in her hand.

Their second stop was a small apothecary shop in the southern district. Inside smelled of dried herbs and potions. The old woman smiled when she saw them.

“Have you come again, children? Do you need potions?”

Luna nodded politely.

“Just… we’re going to leave something. Read it. Please.”

She placed the copy on the counter. The woman opened the paper; as her eyes moved between the lines they slowly widened. Her hand trembled.

“This… these names… my grandson’s street…”

Luna said nothing. She only took Eline by the arm and went outside.

After leaving the third copy on the threshold of an inn as well, Eline paused for a moment on the way back. In a narrow side street two armed men were whispering.

“…did you see the list? It has Vaelor’s seal. The leaders are panicking…”

Eline held her breath. Her inner voice sharpened:

(Eline’s inner voice: “It’s spreading. It’s spreading very fast. My mother… my grandmother… will they feel this? Will the Council hear?”)

Luna pulled her.

“Come. We’ve left enough.”

When evening came the five gathered again at the dim table of the inn. Kael took off his wet cloak and sat down.

“I left them at three small guilds under the Shadow Guild. One started copying immediately. The others stayed silent but didn’t tear the paper.”

Deer leaned his sword against the table.

“In the west two gang leaders already went at each other. One accused the other of being a ‘sellout dog.’ A fight broke out.”

Razen added in a calm voice:

“In the east the copies are circulating hand to hand. The merchants are whispering. A few have started hiding their goods.”

Luna was tired but excited.

“In the market a woman cried when she saw her grandson’s name. The apothecary woman said… ‘enough is enough.’”

Kael nodded.

“The first step held. The people are learning. The mask of the gang leaders has begun to crack.”

Razen turned his eyes to Eline. His gaze lasted long.

“The speed of the spread… is more than I expected. Above will feel this. Especially if there is an aura leak.”

Eline hunched her shoulders; her voice trembled:

“I-I… did nothing. I just followed.”

Kael cut in; his voice was measured:

“For now it’s enough. Tomorrow we move to the second stage. We need to find the delivery points. But today… the list is no longer only in our hands.”

Outside the rain had intensified again. The torch lights seeping through the windows of the inn flickered on the wet stones.

On the walls of the Shadow Guild, on the market stalls, in the hidden corners of the side streets… the copies were circulating hand to hand.

The first leak had occurred.

And the foundation of the Lower City had slowly begun to boil.

As Eline sat at the edge of the table stirring the cold soup in her hand, her inner voice was no longer a whisper but a heavy echo:

(Eline’s inner voice: “I distributed the list. I gave the seal of my own lineage to the people. And no one knows yet… that I am also of that seal’s blood. But those names… those children… are real. There is no going back now.”)

Five shadows sat silently in the dim room.

Outside, the city had begun for the first time to smell its own blood.

…

Morning came with the heavy dampness left by the rain. The streets of the Lower City were more tense than usual. Stalls had opened early, but conversations had turned to whispers. People looked at each other, then quickly averted their eyes.

When Kael, Luna, Deer, Razen, and Eline gathered in the upper-floor room of the Shadow Guild, even the murmur seeping from under the counter had changed.

The guild master opened the door a crack and entered. His face was grim, his voice low:

“Last night three separate inns were burned. In the western district two gang leaders stabbed each other. On the eastern side the merchants pulled their goods into the warehouses. And… the copies of the list are everywhere. In the market square a woman hung one on the leader’s door. She wrote ‘Our children’s names’ underneath.”

Kael leaned back in his chair.

“It spread fast.”

“Too fast,” said the guild master. “Some are blaming you. Some are thanking you. But all of them are afraid. Vaelor’s name is on tongues. The seal of Above… is no longer a secret.”

When the door closed Deer spoke in a low voice:

“Good. Their masks have fallen.”

Razen was looking out the window.

“But the panic is uncontrolled. Within a few days either a rebellion will break out or the leaders will take harsher measures. They may advance the delivery.”

Luna tapped the table with her fingers.

“Then we must move to the second stage. If they move before we find the delivery point…”

Kael nodded.

“Today we will watch the results. Until evening walk the streets, listen. Who is panicking, who is staying silent, who is arming. We meet at the inn in the evening. Tomorrow… the interruption begins.”

In the afternoon the streets were boiling.

Deer passed in front of an old rival inn in the western district. There were shouts inside. The men of one leader had written “sellout” in blood on the other leader’s door. Deer stood in the shadows and listened. The conversations were clear: trust had ended because of the lists. Some men were talking about fleeing.

Razen advanced more quietly on the eastern side. Behind a warehouse he heard the whisper of three merchants. They were planning to smuggle their goods out at night. “Before Vaelor’s men come,” they were saying. Razen moved away without saying anything. But for a moment he felt a thin aura fluctuation coming from afar. Very weak, suppressed… familiar. Although his eyes narrowed he showed no reaction.

Luna and Eline were walking in the narrow streets at the edge of the market. A group of women were passing a torn copy from hand to hand. One of them had tears in her eyes.

“My nephew’s name is on it… Thirteen years old.”

Luna clenched her teeth. Eline was beside her; her face was pale. Her inner voice weighed heavily:

(Eline’s inner voice: “The names… real names. I used to hear those lists as ‘yield reports.’ Now the women are crying. And I am still walking among them. Razen’s gaze was long last night. Did he really notice?”)

In a side street two armed men noticed them. One said in a low voice:

“Those girls… may be the ones who left the copies last night.”

Luna tightly held Eline’s arm; they quickly mixed into the crowd. The men did not follow.

When they gathered again at the inn in the evening the table was silent. Everyone told what they had heard in turn.

Kael summarized:

“The gang leaders have fallen on each other. The merchants are fleeing. The people are angry but not yet organized. The guild master is warning us: it will reach Above’s ears. Maybe a day or two, maybe less.”

Deer pressed on the hilts of his swords.

“Then we cannot wait for the delivery. It may have been advanced.”

Razen spoke in a calm voice:

“There is movement at the eastern mine exit. Last night three carts entered, this morning they came out empty. The number of guards has increased. Probable point is there.”

Kael opened his notebook.

“The second stage begins.
Target: Cut the next delivery. Rescue those written on the list. Capture at least two of the leaders alive. Make them confess in front of the people. We will make them say Vaelor’s name openly.

Plan:
Deer and I will infiltrate the main group. Luna will create a distraction. Razen will cut the ceiling and escape routes. Eline… you will guide the rescued. You will not draw a weapon. You will only show the escape route.”

Eline lifted her head. Her voice was less trembling this time:

“I-I understand.”

(Eline’s inner voice: “We will rescue. The people my lineage calls ‘resources.’ And I will show them the way. If the aura leaks… Razen will not stay silent. But I can no longer go back.”)

Kael folded the paper.

“Tomorrow at midnight. Eastern mine exit. Prepare. Potions, smoke, spare weapons. This time it is not only a guild mission. The people’s eyes will be on us… whether we want it or not.”

Deer stood up.

“Bonebreaker blood will be spilled. But this time… with witnesses.”

Razen adjusted his turban; his eyes lingered on Eline for a moment.

“Aura control… is important. Especially tomorrow.”

No one said anything.

As night settled outside, the streets of the Lower City were still full of whispers. The lists were circulating hand to hand, the gang leaders were arming, the people were waiting in anger.

The first leak had worked.
The cracks had opened.

Now the second step was coming:
The interruption.

And this time, the smell of blood would spread not only upward, but also onto the city’s own stones.

…

At midnight the air at the mouth of the eastern mine exit was sharp as a blade. The moon had disappeared behind the clouds; only the torch lights flickered on the stone walls. Three closed carts were waiting with the clinking of chains and low command voices. Around them black-armored guards and two gang leaders — one old and fat, the other young and nervous — were checking the lists.

Kael whispered from the shadows:

“Now.”

Deer slid from the left like a shadow. Even before his twin swords left their scabbards two guards had been laid low. Luna struck her staff into the ground from the right; a wave of wind flung the covers of the carts, and the shouts of the prisoners rose. Razen descended from the ceiling hole and in a single move neutralized the three men on the escape route.

Kael threw a smoke bomb. As the mist filled the area he pressed his short sword to the old leader’s throat.

“Make a sound. Or it ends here.”

The young leader tried to flee but Deer caught him by the shoulder and slammed him to the ground. The tip of the sword touched his throat.

“Alive,” Kael said in a low voice. “We need them for the confession.”

Eline was at the very back, guiding the rescued. Chains were being broken; frightened faces were dispersing into the darkness. When a child slipped, Eline reflexively caught his arm. The aura leaked for a moment — thin, pure, suppressed. Razen’s gaze lingered in that direction for a second but he did not lower his sword.

The clash was short. The guards were either on the ground or had fled. The two leaders were bound, on their knees, standing in the open area in front of the mine exit. Around them the rescued and the neighborhood residents who had woken at midnight had begun to gather. Torches multiplied. The people’s murmur rose.

Kael pushed the old leader forward.

“Speak. On whose order?”

The man trembled, but when Deer’s sword pressed harder against his neck his voice came out hoarse:

“Vaelor… Great Head Vaelor. The quota is his. In exchange for gold and immunity… we gave our own people.”

The young leader repeated the same thing, his voice broken:

“It increases every month. If we refuse they take our heads. The list… comes with his seal.”

The murmur suddenly turned to anger. A woman shouted:

“Our children! You sold them!”

Stones began to fly through the air. As the leaders covered themselves on the ground Kael raised his hand.

“Don’t kill them. First let everyone hear.”

At that exact moment the air changed.

Heavy, slow footsteps were heard from the rocks above the mine exit. The red cloak billowed in the wind. The golden armor pieces shone in the torchlight. When the massive spear in his hand lightly struck the ground the stones trembled.

Vaelor had descended.

The people stepped back. The silence was like a knife. Vaelor’s gaze shifted to the bound leaders, then to Kael. His face was hard as always; his voice low and clear:

“Those below… are overstepping their bounds again.”

Kael took a step forward. His red hair burned in the torchlight. His voice was also low but sharp as a blade. Style and weight intertwined:

“Bounds?
What you call ‘quota’ are the names of our children.
What you call ‘resource’ is our blood.
These two dogs sold their own district for you. Now they have confessed in front of the people.
And you descend from above and still say ‘bounds.’
What bounds, Vaelor?
Are you talking about bounds on our soil, over our dead?”

Vaelor leaned his spear on his shoulder. There was no contempt in his eyes; only calculation.

“You… the red-haired one. The strategist. The mind behind the list is you.
Those below always rebel. Then they are crushed.
This time it will be the same.
But you… made a little more noise. Congratulations.”

Kael took another step closer. The distance between them was closing. The people were watching with held breath.

“Noise?
No. This is not noise.
This is the cracking of your lie.
The seal is a lie. The entity is a lie. The quota is a lie.
You thought of us as fuel. We, however, are now the fire.
Take these two leaders, take them away, kill them or reward them as you wish.
But know this:
If you write a name on the next list, the owners of those names will come to your door.
And this time… we will also go up.”

Vaelor’s jaw tightened. The shaft of the spear lightly clinked on the stone.

“Insolence.
You are a mortal. I am one of the Great Heads.
Your blood, your aura, your lifespan… all are measurable.
If I spill blood here today, this district will be ash tomorrow.
But… the Council’s patience has not yet run out.
I am giving you a chance, red-haired one.
Disperse. Forget the lists. Give back your leaders.
Otherwise on my next descent… the ‘interruption’ will be on your throats.”

Kael smiled. The smile was cold.

“We will not disperse.

We will not forget.
And we are not giving the leaders either.
They are now the people's property.
And you… have just declared war.
Go, tell your Council:
The dogs below are no longer only barking.
They are biting."

Vaelor looked for a long time. His gaze lingered on Eline for a moment — very short, almost unnoticeable — then returned to Kael.

"War…
Yes.
You wanted this."

He struck his spear on the ground. The stones cracked. As the red cloak billowed Vaelor turned his back. He walked with heavy steps toward the rocks, then disappeared with a teleportation light.

Left behind were only the torch smoke, the bound leaders, and a breathless crowd.

Kael turned around. Deer, Luna, Razen, and Eline were beside him. The people's murmur had risen again — anger, fear, but now also hope.

Deer spoke in a low voice:

"War has been declared."

Kael sheathed his sword.

"Yes.
And this time… both sides know."

Eline stood at the very back. Her hands were trembling. Her inner voice was like a storm:

(Eline's inner voice: "Vaelor… the warrior of the Council. A man of my lineage. And Kael stood upright against him. In the middle of the people. But now… there is no going back. The war has begun. And I am between two fires.")

As night grew heavy over the Lower City, the five shadows, taking the bound leaders and the rescued, melted into the darkness.

Above, Vaelor's report had already begun to echo under the crystal dome.

War had been officially opened.

…

Toward morning the streets of the Lower City were still tense. The torch smoke had not dispersed; the people's murmur echoed in the side streets. As the two bound leaders were pushed in through the back door of the Shadow Guild, no one asked too many questions. The guild master only nodded and locked them in the iron-doored room in the basement.

Kael, Luna, Deer, Razen, and Eline went up to the upper floor. The heavy wooden door was open. Aruze was sitting behind the desk in her usual neatly cut guild uniform. This time she held not a sealed parchment but a few fresh reports. When she saw them she raised her eyebrows but did not smile.

"Sit."

The five sat opposite her. Aruze placed one of the reports on the desk.

"Eastern mine exit. Midnight. Two leaders detained. Several dozen prisoners freed. And… Vaelor."

Kael leaned back in his chair.

"They confessed in front of the people. They said Vaelor's name. Then he himself descended."

Aruze clasped her fingers together. The curious light in her eyes was sharper this time.

"And you stood against him. In the middle of the people. Against one of the Great Heads. Your words… have already gone beyond the guild walls. I heard it from three separate sources this morning. They say 'the red-haired strategist declared war on Vaelor.'"

Deer spoke in a low voice:

"He declared it. We only responded."

Aruze looked at Deer, then at Razen, then at Eline. Her gaze lingered on Eline a second longer but she said nothing.

"As a guild our official stance for now is 'neutrality.' But neutrality… is now a luxury. Vaelor's descent, the leaking of the list, the leaders' confessions… all have reached Above's ears. The Council's reaction will not be delayed."

Kael leaned forward.

"What will you tell us, Aruze? Support, or 'keep a low profile'?"

Aruze smiled slightly. The smile this time was not cute; it was tired.

"Neither.
I will tell you the truth.

Some wings of the Shadow Guild are afraid. Some, however… are on your side. I am in Human Resources and Mission Assignment. I keep your files. And looking at your files I see this: You are no longer an ordinary team. You have become a spark."

Luna rested her staff on her knee.

"Whether the spark will burn or go out is up to us?"

"To both of us," Aruze said. "But as a guild I cannot give you an official mission. Because an official mission means open war against Vaelor. And we are not yet that strong.
However… unofficially, I am leaving the two leaders in the basement to you. You can multiply the confession documents. You can examine the teleportation remnants at the eastern mine exit. And… if new documents appear, they will come to your table first."

Razen asked in a calm voice:

"What will the Council's next move be?"

Aruze shrugged.

"I don't know. But Vaelor does not descend for nothing. He has already given his report. The Great Heads will convene. Either they will want to make an 'example' of you, or they will switch to a harsher quota. One of the two."

Kael pulled out his notebook and took rapid notes.

"We will keep the leaders public. We will multiply the confession documents and send them to the other guilds as well. As for the mine exit… we will close it. Permanently."

Aruze nodded.

"Reasonable. But one warning:
Eline."

Eline started. Her inner voice stopped for a moment.

(Eline's inner voice: "She said my name. Why?")

Aruze fixed her eyes directly on her.

"You are not in the files. No record, no past, no guild membership. You only appear as 'village girl.' But last night at the mine exit… some said they felt a thin aura. Suppressed, pure. Belonging to Above."

The room fell silent for a moment.

Kael's gaze shifted to Eline. Deer's hand went to the hilt of his sword. Razen said nothing; he only adjusted the edge of his turban.

Eline answered with a trembling voice:

“I-I… don’t know. Maybe Luna’s magic reflected. I was just… staying quiet as a mouse.”

Aruze looked for a long time. Then she smiled slightly.

“For now let’s accept it that way. But remember: In this guild secrets do not live long. Especially in times of war.”

Kael cut in; his voice was measured:

“Eline is with us. For now that is enough.”

Aruze leaned back in her chair.

“All right. Then listen:
The guild is leaving an open door for you. But the door is two-way. As you grow, we also become targets. Choose your next step well. Because Vaelor’s declaration of war… has settled not only on your shoulders but on ours as well.”

The five stood up. Aruze escorted them to the door.

“One more thing.
The leaders in the basement… let them stay alive a while longer. If we ‘lose’ them before the people’s anger settles, the spark goes out. Agreed?”

Kael nodded.

“Agreed.”

When they came out into the corridor Luna murmured in a low voice:

“Aruze… seems to be supporting us. But at the same time she’s warning.”

Deer adjusted his swords.

“Support is not enough. We need power.”

Razen gave Eline a short look, then moved ahead.

“Keep the aura… under control. From now on everyone is listening.”

Eline lowered her head. Her inner voice was heavy and clear:

(Eline’s inner voice: “Aruze noticed. Razen already knows. Kael is suspicious. And I am still the ‘village girl.’ But the war has begun. Now merely lying will not be enough. Either I will make a choice… or the choice will be made for me.”)

When the heavy door of the guild closed behind them, the first gray lights of morning had appeared over the Lower City.
War had been declared.

Chapter 7: The Red Plague

Beyond the sky, in the white marble castle where even the stars remained below, the doors of the Council Hall slowly closed. The light filtering from the crystal dome fell onto the center of the hexagonal table. The air smelled of lavender and cold metal.

The Six Great Heads had taken their places.

Seraphinas's solar halo slowly rotated; Lunarias's crescent crown trembled like a shadow. Vaelor had leaned his spear beside him, his jaw tight. Elyndras's green hair fell over her shoulders; her fingers gripped the edge of the seat. The eye at the tip of Morrigan's staff was half-open. Caelion smiled silently with his star halo; the smile was again not sincere.

Seraphinas was the first to speak. Her voice was soft but clear:

"The agenda is singular.
The rebellion below.
And the center of that rebellion."

Vaelor leaned forward. His red cloak hung from his shoulder.

"Name: Kael.
True name… Kael Ezren Ashborne.

Red-haired. Strategist. Affiliated with the Shadow Guild.
He stood against me in front of the people. Declared war.
He had the leaders captured alive, made them confess, leaked the lists.
Those below are listening to him."

Lunarias half-opened her eyes.

"Ashborne… A lineage that appears in the old records. A line from the Age of War that was lost below.
How did he survive?"

Vaelor shrugged.

"Unknown. Under investigation.
No family. His father died of Spotted Fever; his mother disappeared years ago in an Upper Class mansion.
He himself grew up on the streets. In the guild records he appears as 'strategist.'
But the real danger… those around him."

A low voice rose from under Morrigan's veil:

"His team."

"Yes," Vaelor said. "Four more people.
A masked sword master – one of the survivors of the old 'Bonebreaker' massacre.
An eastern sword master – Razen Takayukinobu. His techniques surpass even the palace guards.
A young mage girl – novice but with potential.
And… a village girl. No record. Aura leak reported. Suppressed, pure. May belong to Above.
Investigation ongoing. Not yet clear."

Elyndras's fingers gripped the seat more tightly. Her face was pale but her voice came out controlled:

"The aura leak… how strong?"

Vaelor looked at her. His gaze was short and sharp.

"Weak. As if sealed. But it exists.
If that girl is truly one of us… the situation becomes even more complicated."

Caelion leaned slightly forward.

"Eliminating Ashborne will not be enough.
He is a spark. If you extinguish the spark, ash remains. But the wind scatters the ash.
The real issue… is to uproot the rebellion."

Vaelor pressed on the shaft of his spear.

“There is a way to uproot it.
The Red Plague.”

The hall froze for a moment.

Seraphinas’s solar halo slowed.

“The Red Plague…
A biological parasite locked away for centuries.
Alive. Reproducing. Controllable… in theory.”

Vaelor nodded.

“Yes.
If released into the lower city, it silences the rebellion.
Those infected first develop fever, then suffer pain to the point of madness, and finally their bodies collapse.
Even the resistant ones become carriers.
Within a few weeks every organized movement in the Lower City is paralyzed.
Including Kael Ezren Ashborne.”

Lunarias raised her voice. Her crescent crown trembled:

“Is it controllable, Vaelor?
It was tried a century ago. It destroyed one region. Then it spread with the wind to neighboring lands.
One-third of our ‘resource’ areas collapsed.
Will you try it again now?”

The eye at the tip of Morrigan’s staff fully opened.

“The risk of failure is high.
If the plague escapes control… it will contaminate not only below but also the teleportation lines.
The probability of it jumping Above is low but not zero.
Your ‘declaration of war’ already made noise. Will you now add a plague as well?”

Elyndras stood up. Her green hair swirled.

“This is madness.
Even while using those below as fuel there was a balance.
The Red Plague destroys the balance.
And if Ashborne is truly of that old lineage… the plague may not kill him.
It will only make him more dangerous.”

Vaelor lightly struck his spear on the ground. The sound came out solid:

“The balance is over.
That red-haired one defied me in front of the people.
The leaders confessed. The lists leaked.
The Council’s authority is shaking.
The Red Plague… is the cleanest solution.
I have updated the control protocols. The release points are ready.
One order is enough.”

Seraphinas raised her hand. The solar halo flashed and spread a warm but authoritative light through the hall.

“Enough.
Vaelor… your failure is already on the table.
As a Great Head you descended below, took a step back in front of the people, were forced to declare war.
Now you propose to end everything with a parasite of doubtful control.
This… smells of weakness.”

Lunarias added:

“If you fail, the plague will be written on your shoulders.
Not the Council’s. Yours.”

Caelion spoke while keeping his smile:

“Killing Ashborne is easy.
But making him ‘the rebel destroyed by the plague’… creates a legend.
Instead of extinguishing the spark with ash, you will have scattered it to the wind.”

Morrigan spoke the last word from under her veil:

“Let the investigation finish.
Let the team be clarified.
Who is the girl with the aura leak, what are Ashborne’s true connections… releasing the Red Plague without knowing is swinging a sword blindly.
And a sword swung blindly… often cuts its own wielder.”

Vaelor’s jaw tightened. He leaned his spear on his shoulder.

“Then what do you propose?
To wait and let the rebellion grow?”

Seraphinas stood up. The solar halo illuminated the hall once more.

“Let the investigation be accelerated.
Let everything about Ashborne and his team be extracted.
The girl with the aura leak… is priority.
The Red Plague option remains on the table. But the order… will not yet be given.

Your failure has made enough noise, Vaelor.
On the next one… the noise will be buried with you.”

Vaelor lowered his head. But the anger in his eyes had not disappeared.

“Understood.”

Elyndras slowly sat back in her place. Her fingers were still trembling. The single thought passing through her was a whisper no one heard:

Eline… if that aura leak is you…

The hall sank back into silence.
Under the crystal dome, the name of the Red Plague had not yet become an order.
But it was now on everyone’s tongue.

And below, the name of Kael Ezren Ashborne, still unaware… had for the first time been carved into the Council’s official records in its full form.

…

Vaelor’s private chamber was a few corridors away from the Council Hall. The marble walls were thick; they let no sound through. Only a single crystal lamp was burning; its light danced on the folds of the red cloak.

The moment the door closed, Vaelor leaned his spear against the wall. The golden armor pieces on his shoulders were still trembling. Opposite him three commanders were lined up; all silent, all waiting.

Vaelor said nothing for a while. He only paced inside the room. His steps were hard. Then he suddenly stopped; his face was crimson.

“Disgrace…” he muttered. He raised his voice. “A complete disgrace!”

The oldest of the commanders leaned slightly forward but did not dare to speak.

Vaelor struck the table with his hand. The crystal tablet shook.

“The Council… started with ‘If you fail.’ Then continued with ‘if something happens.’ Again ‘if you fail’… Again… Again! I’m fed up to the back teeth. Everyone chewed the same words over and over. What did I do to you? Huh? Tell me what I did, damn it!”

No one opened their mouth. Vaelor’s gaze roamed over them.

“I’ve been sitting at that table for years. For years I’ve met the quotas, suppressed rebellions, ensured the flow of resources. Now because of one red-haired man my reputation is worth five coins. I was forced to take a step back in front of the people. And they poured salt and

pepper on top. They said ‘it will be written on your shoulders.’ They said ‘the noise will be buried with you.’”

He clenched the shaft of the spear. His knuckles whitened.

“Enough. I will listen no more.”

The youngest commander swallowed. “Great Head… the Council has not yet given the order. The investigation—”

“Investigation?!” Vaelor’s voice filled the room. “Until the investigation finishes that red-head grows a little more every day. The lists are circulating hand to hand, the leaders are confessing, the people are rising. Am I supposed to sit at that table and say ‘let’s wait’?”

The commanders looked at each other.

Vaelor took a deep breath. The anger in his eyes had turned into a cold decision.

“Release the plague. Immediately. The release points are ready. The protocols are updated. Leave none of them alive. Not a single one. Kael Ezren Ashborne, the masked one, the turbaned one, the mage girl… all of them. If they somehow survive, then we release the soldiers. But first let the plague finish the job.”

The oldest commander asked hesitantly: “The Council…”

“I have nothing to say to the Council. This order is mine. The result is also on my shoulders. Go. What are you waiting for?”

The three commanders paused for a moment. Then they bowed their heads at the same time and walked backward to the door. When the door closed Vaelor was left alone.

He stood in the middle of the room. His red cloak was still swaying slightly. He looked down from the window at the dark city under the clouds.

“Red-haired one…” he whispered. “Now let’s see who will become ash.”

Below, while night slowly settled over the still-unaware Lower City, in the secret warehouses on the eastern and western borders the sealed crystal tubes were being opened one by one. A red, living, reproducing mist was being thinned enough for the wind to carry and prepared to be released into the night.

Vaelor waited alone in his room, leaning on his spear.

This time there was no stepping back.

…

In the upper-floor room of the Shadow Guild the air was heavy.

Kael sat at the head of the table, weighing the edge of his notebook with his fingers. Opposite him Deer was silently polishing the hilts of his swords. Luna had rested her staff on her knee; her gaze was fixed on the floor. Razen stood by the window, turning the tip of his turban between his fingers. Eline sat in the chair in the farthest corner, her hands clasped in her lap, listening without joining the conversation.

The guild master's footsteps rose rapidly from the stairs. When the door opened the man's face was grimmer than usual. He held a few crumpled reports in his hand.

"Three inns closed at once in the eastern district," he said directly. "On the western side the market stalls are empty. People are developing fever, their skin is turning red, their eyes are bloodshot. Within a few hours they suffer pain to the point of madness… then they collapse. They've named it: the Red Plague."

Kael's hand stopped on the notebook.

"How fast is it spreading?"

"Four districts in one day. The guild healers are helpless. The potions don't work. The carriers also look healthy, then suddenly collapse. The people are in panic. Some say 'the wrath of Above,' some say 'the price of the rebellion.'"

Deer muttered in a low voice.
"Vaelor…"

Razen turned slightly toward the window.
"A controlled epidemic. Carried by the wind. Not random."

Luna lifted her head. There was fear in her voice but no panic.
"Then there must be an antidote somewhere. If they're releasing it, they're protecting themselves too."

Kael stood up.
"Inform Aruze. We'll scan all the old records, disease reports, everything remaining from the Age of War. At the same time we'll listen to the rumors on the streets. Where the plague started, where the first cases were seen, whether anyone said 'it came from there'… everything is important."

…

For the next two days the team barely slept at all.

Deer wandered the western districts and gathered information from old gang connections. Razen silently tracked around the eastern warehouses. Luna and Eline walked through the markets, apothecary shops, and healer tents, listening while people talked. Kael disappeared among the dusty shelves in the guild archive.

The first clue came from a laundry woman on the western edge.
“My nephew was one of the first to fall ill,” she had said in a trembling voice. “At midnight he smelled the wind coming from the eastern mine road. In the morning he developed a fever… by noon his eyes were filled with blood.”

The second clue was in the notebook of an old guild healer.
“Red Plague… tried a century ago. A special antidote was developed for control. The formula is lost. But the production site… is referred to as ‘the deep stone below.’”

The third and clearest clue was the information Deer obtained at midnight from an old smuggler.

“Vaelor’s men,” the smuggler had said in a hushed voice. “After releasing the plague they disappeared themselves. But I know where they went down. Under the old stone quarry on the far west of the city… there are dungeons unused for years. Inside it’s wet, full of rat corpses, the walls covered in mold. They’ve set up a laboratory there. They’re also keeping the antidote there. Because the plague must stay outside, the antidote inside.”

When Kael heard this information he brought his fist down on the table.

“The dungeons…”

Razen adjusted his turban.
“Vaelor is there. Protecting the antidote to his own poison. And probably managing the next release from there as well.”

Luna gripped her staff.
“Then we’re going.”

Deer fastened his swords to his waist.
“This time we won’t enter silently. We’ll burn those dungeons.”

Eline stood up. Her hands were trembling but her voice came out clear:
“I’m coming too.”

Kael looked at her. He hesitated for a moment, then nodded.
“All right. But don’t leak aura. That place is his ground. If he notices he will kill us all.”

Eline’s inner voice was harder this time:
(He will notice. But I no longer have a place to run. This plague… is the weapon of my lineage. And I have to stop it.)

Toward midnight five silhouettes began walking toward the abandoned stone quarry on the far west of the Lower City.

The air was heavy and damp. From afar, the sounds of coughing and painful moans from the districts were carried by the wind.

In front of them, the dark mouth of a staircase descending underground waited.

Inside, Vaelor, while checking the antidote bottles in his own disgusting dungeons, was not yet aware.

…

The mouth of the dungeon was hidden in the deepest corner of the abandoned stone quarry. A narrow, damp staircase descended downward. The walls were covered in mold; the floors were slippery and full of rat corpses. The smell coming from inside was a suffocating mixture: iron, rotten meat, and a sharp chemical odor.

Kael led, holding the torch low as he descended. Deer and Razen were right behind him. Luna a little farther back, holding her staff ready. Eline at the very end, advancing as if stuck to the shadows.

(Inside… Far from the “clean laboratories” my mother described. This is a tomb. And I am walking through the door of that tomb with my own feet.)

When the staircase ended they opened into a wide hall. In the center were iron cages, chains on the walls, and in the corner glass tubes and boiling cauldrons. Plague samples. The antidote bottles were also there, shining in a locked cabinet.

Just then a silhouette emerged from the darkness.

An elite guard. Vaelor’s special unit. Nearly three meters tall, armor black with red veins, spiked plates on the shoulders. There was no mask on his face; instead a metal cage, and red eyes glowed from inside. The massive mace in his hand cracked the stones every time it touched the ground.

“Unauthorized entrants…” he roared. The voice echoed off the dungeon walls. “The Great Head’s order is clear. No one leaves.”

Deer drew his swords.
“Stop talking.”

Razen tightened his turban and slowly drew his sword from its scabbard.
“Both of us together.”

The attack began at once.

Deer charged from the left, striking the joints of the armor with his twin swords. Razen from the right, delivering fast and precise cuts. But the guard was unexpectedly agile. When he swung his mace it struck Deer’s left shoulder; the armor shattered, blood sprayed. Deer was thrown backward and fell to his knees.

Razen immediately leaped on him but the guard caught him with his other hand. The metal fingers sank into Razen's chest, then flung the man against the wall. The stone cracked. When Razen fell to the ground blood came from his mouth; his sword slipped from his hand.

Luna raised her staff and sent a wave of wind but the wave scattered on the armor. Kael threw a smoke bomb; mist filled the area. As the guard emerged from the mist he brought his mace down on Kael.

Kael met it with his sword but the difference in power was too great. His knees buckled; his back slammed into the wall. When the mace came down a second time Kael's sword broke. The guard seized him by the throat and lifted him up.

"Strategist…" he muttered. "The Great Head wanted you especially."

Kael's breath was being cut off. His feet were off the ground; his ribs were being crushed.

Eline was frozen in the corner, in the shadow of a pillar. Her hands were trembling.

(Now… If I don't move now he dies. All of them die. But if I use magic… the aura will leak. Razen is already suspicious. But Kael's throat…)

She put her finger between her teeth. A deep bite. Blood flowed. She closed her eyes. In her mind she recalled that ancient seal formula her mother had forbidden in childhood. The blood shaped itself into a thin line at the tip of her finger. Then it rose into the air like an invisible thread.

It stuck to a point on the chest plate of the guard's armor that no one saw.

Eline whispered, her voice almost nonexistent:
"Explode."

For a moment nothing happened.

Then a sharp cracking sound came from inside the armor. The red veins suddenly swelled; the metal plates ballooned outward and exploded. Fragments flew in every direction. The guard let out a scream; the mace fell from his hand; he released Kael.

The moment Kael hit the ground he grabbed the hilt of his broken sword. He lunged at the still-staggering body of the guard and drove it into the open gash in the throat. Blood sprayed from inside the metal cage. The giant body collapsed to the ground.

Silence settled.

Deer was trying to stand while holding his shoulder. Luna immediately ran to his side. Razen, while straightening from the wall, locked his gaze directly on Eline.

That momentary pure aura… belonging to Above, ancient, suppressed but still sharp. Razen's body, sensitive to high energies, had clearly felt the dispersion of that moment. The source was the girl in the corner.

They locked eyes.

Eline's breath caught in her throat.

(He saw. He definitely saw. Now… what will he do? Will he draw his sword? Or…)

Razen said nothing. He only adjusted his turban, picked up his sword with his bloody hand, and slowly sheathed it. But his gaze did not leave Eline again. From now on one eye was constantly on her.

Kael, out of breath, moved away from the guard's corpse.
"The antidote… in the cabinet. Take it immediately."

Luna ran, broke the lock, and filled the bottles into a bag. Deer spoke through clenched teeth:
"My shoulder… feels broken. But I can walk."

Razen was still looking at Eline. His voice came out as distant as always but lower this time:
"Is anyone else injured?"

Eline swallowed.
"I-I'm fine."

(I'm fine… a lie. My fingers are burning. The aura is still trembling. And that man… is silent. But his silence does not mean he doesn't know.)

Kael held out one of the antidote bottles to Deer.
"Drink. Then we're getting out. We're going to… burn this dungeon."

Razen slowly nodded. His eyes lingered on Eline one more moment, then shifted to the guard's corpse.

"Understood."

Eline came out of the corner. Her steps were still trembling.

(They stayed silent. For now. But Razen's gaze… is like a knife. Hiding will no longer be enough. On the next step either I will confess… or he will speak in my place.)

The five began climbing the dark stairs of the dungeon with the antidote bags. Behind them remained the elite guard's shattered armor and the seeping red liquid.

Razen walked at the very back.
And his eye did not leave Eline for even a moment.

…
The antidote bottles began circulating hand to hand.

On the first day they only sufficed for the districts around the Shadow Guild. Kael took Deer, despite his wounded shoulder, and went to the eastern side. Luna and Eline headed west. Razen went alone even to the farthest villages.

The plague proved more stubborn than expected. In some households the fever lasted three days; some children still raved for one more night even after drinking the antidote. But slowly… it stopped.

Within a week the coughing sounds in the streets of the Lower City decreased. By the end of two weeks the market stalls reopened. By the end of the third week, news that “the fever has stopped” began arriving even from the farthest villages.

A real smile appeared on the guild master’s face for the first time.
“You succeeded,” he said briefly. “For now.”

Deer muttered while tightening the bandage on his shoulder:
“For now is not enough. But we took a breath.”

Kael closed his notebook.
“Training tomorrow. The war isn’t over just because the plague is finished.”

…

That night, after everyone had fallen asleep, Eline quietly opened the cellar door a crack.

(Eline’s inner voice: “I’m running away again. But this time… I don’t know whether I’m running to return, or to leave completely.”)

Outside the night was cool. The moon occasionally showed its face from between the clouds. Eline walked toward the plains outside the walls. She placed her feet carefully so her shoes would make no sound in the mud.

In the middle of the plain, beside an old pile of stones, three silhouettes were waiting. They wore dark cloaks unique to Above. Their faces were covered but their auras… were familiar. Unsuppressed, clean, upper class.

The agent in front bowed his head.
“Elyndra Lunethra. Your family is searching for you. The Council’s eye is now upon you. You need to escape from the hands of these savages.”

Eline stopped. The wind tossed her hair across her face.

(Eline’s inner voice: “Savage… They’re still using that word. A few months ago I would have thought the same thing.”)

The agent continued; his voice was cold and measured:
“Your mother is worried. Your father… is impatient. We have prepared a safe teleportation point for you. The seal on your power can be partially released. Return to the palace. Get out of this mud, this smell, this… among those below.”

Eline said nothing for a while. Her eyes drifted to the dark city beyond the plain.

(Eline’s inner voice: “Kael… puts his own life on the line for what he calls justice. Without lying, without stepping back. Luna… without calling me ‘sister,’ just by standing beside me, showed a sisterly kindness. Deer doesn’t speak but walks at the very front every time. Razen… his eye is still on me. But he is silent. And this city… Children died because of the plague, mothers cried, but they are still standing. They are still holding out bread to each other.”)

The agent took a step closer.
“Time is short. Make your decision.”

Eline lifted her head. Her voice trembled but was clear:

“I will not return.”

The agent’s shoulders tensed.
“What?”

“The cold comfort of the palace… there everyone counts as ‘resources.’ Here, people suffer, but at least it is real. Kael’s justice, Luna’s kindness, this city’s hardship… all of it is real. I no longer want to be part of that lie.”

(Eline’s inner voice: “Mother… if she hears this she will count me as ‘weak.’ Father will say ‘naïve.’ But I… for the first time am making my own decision. And this decision, as frightening as it is… feels right.”)

The agent looked for a long time. Then he slowly nodded.
“Then this is your choice. But know that… your family will not leave you. And when the Council learns that a grandchild of a Great Head is inside the rebellion… it will show no mercy.”

Eline stepped back.
“I know. Still… I am staying.”

The agents looked at each other. Then they dispersed with the wind, as if they had never been there. Left behind were only crushed grass and a thin aura trail.

Eline stood in place for a while longer. Her knees were trembling.

(Eline's inner voice: "I chose. There is no going back now. The doors of the palace have closed to me. But… tonight, for the first time, I felt I belonged somewhere with my own feet. Dangerous, dirty, full of pain… but real.")

As she walked toward the city the sky slowly began to lighten. When she opened the cellar door the inside was still silent. Everyone was sleeping.

Eline lay down on her bed. Her eyes were open, looking at the ceiling.

(Eline's inner voice: "Razen… will look again tomorrow. Maybe this time he will ask. Maybe he will never ask. But now lying… is no longer as easy as before. Because this time, I am not lying to myself either.")

As the Lower City began to wake outside, Eline decided for the first time to truly sleep.

She had made her choice.
And the weight of the choice had settled on her chest like a sweet pain.

Chapter 8: The Great Harvest

The doors of the Council Hall closed more firmly this time.

The light filtering from the crystal dome was pale. The Six Great Heads had taken their places. The air smelled not of lavender, but of cold metal and tension.

Seraphinas stood up. The solar halo this time rotated more sharply.

“We will speak directly. We have no time left.”

Vaelor leaned his spear against the table.
“The Lower City rebellion could not be suppressed. The plague was stopped with the antidote. The lists leaked. The people rose. That red-haired one is still alive.”

Lunarias half-opened her eyes.
“And among them… there is one of us.”

The eye at the tip of Morrigan’s staff fully opened.
“Elyndra Lunethra. Elyndras’s grandchild. Inside the team. Confirmed.”

Elyndras’s face turned pure white. Her fingers gripped the edge of the seat so tightly that her nails seemed about to break. But she did not open her mouth.

Seraphinas struck the table.

“Our political power is shaking. Those below are no longer only ‘resources,’ but an organized threat. To uproot this rebellion… we will sacrifice half of the Lower City.”

Vaelor nodded.
“The eastern and western districts. Mass liquidation. The remainder will submit out of fear. The center of the rebellion will disappear.”

Caelion smiled slightly. The smile was again not sincere.
“Half a city… an acceptable loss for the survival of the system.”

Morrigan spoke from under her veil. Her voice was icy:
“And the grandchild.
Elyndra Lunethra.
She is walking inside the rebellion, beside those below. Aura leak reported. No longer a risk, but betrayal.
I am issuing the execution order.
Immediately.”

The hall completely froze for a moment.

Elyndras sprang to her feet. Her voice came out hoarse:
“This… this against our own blood—”

Seraphinas raised her hand.
“Sit.”

Elyndras did not sit. But no one supported her.

Lunarias added in a distant voice:
“Blood ties are secondary to the survival of the system. A family member… is a bureaucratic loss.”

Vaelor took his spear onto his shoulder.
“The decision is made. Half of the Lower City will be liquidated. The grandchild will be executed. Anyone who objects… is placed on the same scale.”

Caelion lowered his head.
“Silence… is approval.”

No one spoke.
No one objected.

Elyndras slowly sat back in her place. Her green hair had fallen over her shoulders; her eyes were empty.

Seraphinas stood up.
“The Council is dissolved. The orders will take effect at dawn tomorrow.”

The Six Great Heads left the hall one by one.
Elyndras remained last.

—

Midnight.

Elyndras was sitting on the marble floor in her own room. The hems of her cloak were scattered; her hair stuck to her face. The crystal tablet in her hand had long since broken; its pieces were scattered around.

She thought for hours.

She thought.

She thought.

(My blood… My grandchild… While burning them as ‘resources’ I also sat at that table. Now they are writing my own child… as a ‘bureaucratic loss.’ And I… remained silent.)

She covered her face with her hands.

First she trembled.
Then her shoulders shook.
Then her voice came out as a muffled sob.

She cried.

Tears she had not shed for years fell onto the marble. She clenched her teeth, but her voice escaped from her throat. The room was empty. No one was listening.

(The system… eats everything for its survival. It eats a city. It eats a child. And I… am part of that system. Still… part of it.)

She lifted her head. Her eyes were red; her face wet.

Outside the stars shone cold and distant as always.

Elyndras did not get up from her place.
She only continued to cry on the marble floor, among the broken crystal pieces, crushed under the weight of her own silence.

The Council had made its decision.
And the system, once again, had chosen to eat its own children.

…

The Great Harvest period began before dawn.

The first teleportation waves descending from the sky tore through the eastern walls of the Lower City. Vaelor's army poured into the stone streets with hundreds of black-armored guards and heavy sledgehammer war machines. The order was clear: The eastern and western districts would be liquidated. Those who resisted would be destroyed. The remainder would be marked as "resources."

Screams, metal sounds, and the smell of fire suddenly enveloped the city.

Kael was standing in the courtyard of the Shadow Guild. Around him the representatives of the honest guilds had gathered: those who had left the Iron Fist, the old merchant unions, the small craftsman guilds… All armed, all afraid but determined.

Kael raised his voice:
"Barricades. The main streets, the bridges, the market square. We will pile up stone, iron, whatever there is. We will not give passage. This time we will not run. This time… we will stand here."

A few guild leaders nodded. The men immediately dispersed. Within hours the narrow streets of the Lower City turned into improvised barricades. Overturned carts, broken doors, piled rubble… The people defended with whatever they had in their hands.

The war began in front of the barricades.

Deer was at the farthest barricade of the eastern district.

He had removed his mask. The old scars on his face were clear in the torchlight. Opposite him a commander walked, bearing a golden bone symbol on his black armor.

That commander.

The man who years ago in the mountain caves had marked Deer's people as "barbarians" and broken their bones. The field executioner of the Bonebreakers.

When the commander saw him he stopped. He smiled.
"You're still alive… Masked leftover. I should have buried you that night too."

Deer drew his swords. His voice was low and hoarse:
"This time you will be buried."

Both lunged at the same time.

The duel was savage.

With every swing of the commander's sledgehammer the stones shattered. Deer slid like a shadow, landing hits with his twin swords on the joints of the armor. Blood sprayed. The commander was wounded in the shoulder; the edge of the sledgehammer struck Deer's left leg. The bone cracked.

Deer fell to one knee but managed to rise. He threw one of his swords; the blade sank into the gap in the armor at the commander's throat. The man coughed as if choking. Deer leaped on him and with the second sword slit the throat all the way through.

The commander collapsed to the ground. His eyes were still open.

Deer staggered a few steps back. His leg no longer supported him. The old wound on his shoulder had reopened; the deep cut on his chest was bleeding. He dropped to his knees. His breathing was ragged.

"My people…" he whispered. "One more… of them."

Then his eyes darkened.

His body toppled sideways. He completely lost consciousness.

Behind the barricade Luna was shouting:
"Deer! Deer is down!"

Kael threw a smoke bomb and lunged forward. Razen had already reached Deer's side and was dragging him back by the arms. Eline ran to them in panic.

(Eline's inner voice: "Blood… So much blood. Deer… He killed that commander but he himself… isn't getting up. This war… has only just begun and we are already losing one of us.")

Kael clenched his teeth.
"Take him to the back. Immediately. We will hold the barricade."

Razen hoisted Deer onto his back. The blood had stained his own armor. He said only one sentence:
"He is still breathing."

In the distance Vaelor's army was preparing the second wave.

The Great Harvest had begun.
And the Lower City had already spilled its first blood.

…

Vaelor's castle rose behind the eastern walls as an old stone fortress. On the second day of the Great Harvest, at the bloodiest moment of the barricade battles, Kael decided on an infiltration with a small team.

Deer had still not regained consciousness; the wounds Luna had improvised bandages for had stopped the bleeding but the man could not be considered standing. Still, Kael, Razen,

Luna, and Eline entered the castle. The goal was clear: either kill Vaelor or at least break the chain of command.

Inside the corridors were dim and deserted. The clash erupted in a hall near the throne room. Kael threw a smoke bomb, Razen drew his swords, Luna swung her staff. Several guards were laid low.

At that exact moment the side doors of the hall burst open.

Four elite Above guards charged in. Their armor was bright white and gold; their auras unsuppressed and sharp. The one in front pointed his sword at Eline and shouted in a high, official voice:

“Lady Elyndra Lunethra, Grandchild of Elyndras of the Six Great Heads.
You are now bidding farewell to our ranks.”

The words echoed in the hall.

Everything stopped at once.

Kael’s hand remained in the air. Luna’s staff nearly fell. Razen’s swords froze half in their scabbards.

All the trust on the table was shattered to pieces by that single sentence.

Luna whispered; her voice trembled:
“Eline… what… what are they saying?”

Kael’s gaze locked on Eline. Shock, anger, and a sense of betrayal moved across his face at the same time. He said nothing. He only looked.

Eline took a step backward. Her eyes had filled. Her lips trembled.

(Eline’s inner voice: “Here it is… it has come. Everything I hid, every moment I lied, every lie I said ‘I will stay quiet as a mouse’… now all of it is pouring out. And they… have come to kill me.”)

The guards took a step forward. Their swords shone.

Eline’s voice came out hoarse and broken:
“Stop… Please… Listen.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She raised her hands, showing she was unarmed.

“Yes… I am Elyndra Lunethra. I am Elyndras’s grandchild. I fled from Above. My power was sealed. I lied to you. I was not a village girl. I never was.”

Luna’s breath caught.

“You… to us… all this time…”

Eline continued through sobs:
“But I stayed by your side. Because… because here I saw something real. Kael’s justice, your kindness, Deer’s rage, Razen’s silence… These did not exist in the palace. Only lies and ‘resources.’ I… did not sell you out. I chose you.”

One of the guards raised his sword.
“Enough. The execution order is clear.”

At that exact moment Razen stepped forward. He held his swords crossed and moved in front of the guards. His voice came out as low as always but definitive this time:

“That night in the dungeon… the magic that exploded the elite guard’s armor was cast by her.
A blood seal. An ancient formula belonging to Above.
I felt it. The aura came from her.
She was the one who saved Kael. She also indirectly saved me and Deer.
If she had not been there… the three of us would have died in that dungeon.”

The hall sank into silence again.

Kael looked at Eline. The tears in the girl’s eyes, the fear and… sincerity were clear. These were not the eyes of someone lying. Kael had lived for long years on the streets, among betrayals. He recognized sincerity.

He clenched his teeth. Then he turned his sword toward Eline’s front, pointing it at the guards.

“No one will touch her.”

Luna looked at Kael in surprise.
“Kael… she—”

“I know what she is,” Kael said sharply. “But right now she is with us. And if those guards have come to kill her… it means they have come for us as well.”

Razen tilted his head slightly. Even if he did not approve, he did not object. He did not lower his swords.

Eline covered her face with trembling hands. Tears streamed between her fingers.

(Eline’s inner voice: “They protected me… Still… they protected me. Despite my lie. Despite my betrayal. Was I… worthy of this? I don’t know. But I can no longer go back. Neither to Above… nor to the lies.”)

The leader of the guards swung his sword.
“Then all of you will die.”

Kael dropped a smoke bomb to the ground.
“Try it.”

As the mist filled the area, a new clash erupted in the castle corridors.

This time not only against Vaelor’s men…
but also against the broken trust among themselves and the execution order from Above.

…

When the mist cleared the four elite guards lay on the ground.

Razen’s swords were covered in blood. Luna’s staff trembled. Kael was wounded in the shoulder but standing. Eline was in the corner, out of breath, her hands still trembling.

Kael kicked the door.
“Up. To the tower.”

The stairs were narrow and steep. With every step metal sounds and distant screams could be heard. When they reached the topmost room of the tower the door was already open.

Vaelor was waiting for them.

His red cloak hung from his shoulder; the massive spear in his hand leaned against the ground. The moment they entered the room a golden-colored aura exploded. It covered the room like a wave. The air grew heavy; breathing became difficult. The walls trembled. The aura was so dense that the eyes dazzled; the knees softened involuntarily.

Luna staggered backward.
“This… what is this?”

Razen clenched his teeth.
“Great Head aura… Full power.”

Vaelor did not smile. He only looked.
“You have come. The remnants of the rebellion. The red-haired strategist, the masked leftover, the turbaned foreigner, the novice mage… and the grandchild.”

Eline’s voice trembled:
“Vaelor—”

“Silence,” Vaelor said. His voice filled the room. “Your turn is later.”

Kael stepped forward. Blood was seeping from his shoulder but his voice was clear:
“Withdraw your army. Stop this massacre. People are not ‘resources.’”

Vaelor tilted his head slightly.

“People have always been resources. Without us this world would have already been destroyed. We take on the sins so that you may live in peace. We hold the seal. We calculate the quota. We write the names of your children… so that the rest of you may live.”

Luna shouted:
“Peace?! Children are dying! Mothers are crying! Is this what you call ‘peace’?!”

Vaelor’s aura intensified for a moment more.
“Ingratitude.
What ingratitude!
You are ungrateful, ungrateful!”

He made a single move.

He did not even strike his spear on the ground. He only raised his hand. The golden aura lashed like a whip. Razen’s swords cracked in midair and broke in two. Metal pieces fell to the ground. Luna raised her staff and tried to form a wave of wind but the aura swallowed the magic; Luna’s hands burned; her staff was flung away.

Kael lunged forward. He swung his sword.

Without even moving a finger Vaelor seized Kael with his aura. He lifted the red-haired strategist into the air and slammed him to the ground. The stone floor cracked. Blood sprayed from Kael’s mouth. His chest had collapsed; his legs did not move.

Vaelor walked toward him. He had leaned his spear on his shoulder; his gaze was cold.
“You… were the most dangerous. You united the people. You opened a crack in our lies. Now… you end here.”

Kael was on the ground, covered in blood, trying to breathe. His voice came out hoarse:
“You… are not a god… Just… a coward…”

Vaelor raised his spear.
“Your time has now run out.”

The spear descended.

A single thrust.

It passed through Kael’s chest. It sank into the stone floor. The red hair was soaked in blood. His eyes remained open for one more moment, then emptied.

The room froze.

A scream tore from Luna’s mouth.
“KAEL!!”

Razen gripped the broken sword hilts tightly, looking as if he had been nailed to the spot.

Eline dropped to her knees. She covered her mouth with her hands. Tears flowed like a flood.

(Eline's inner voice: "No… No no no… Kael… He… he is dead. Before my eyes… Because of me? Or… because of the system? Get up… Please get up… Speak… Say something…")

Vaelor withdrew his spear. Blood dripped. His aura still filled the room.

"One more rebellion has been suppressed," he said in a calm voice. "Now… it is your turn."

Luna picked up her staff from the ground with trembling hands. Her voice was broken and full of rage:
"You… you killed him… You are a monster itself!"

Razen took a step. Even with the broken sword hilts he moved in front of Vaelor.
"This… is not over."

Vaelor looked at them. In his eyes there was neither pity nor anger. Only a tired certainty:
"Not over?
That red-haired one is dead. The barricades will collapse. The people will scatter. You will also remain here.
Grandchild… you too. Even your mother's tears will not save you."

Eline lifted her head from the ground. Her face was wet; her voice trembled but was clear:
"You… are not taking on the sins. You are choosing the sin. And we… are not ungrateful. We simply… no longer want to remain silent."

Vaelor took his spear onto his shoulder again. The golden aura intensified once more.

"Then do not remain silent.
Die shouting."

At the top of the tower, under the golden light, while the team stared in horror…
Vaelor prepared his second move.

…

Eline was on her knees on the ground.

Her hands trembled. Her eyes shifted from Kael's motionless body to Vaelor's golden aura. Something inside her broke. That seal her mother and grandmother had suppressed for years… could no longer hold.

She pressed her fingers to her chest. Her nails dug into the flesh. Blood seeped. She clenched her teeth.

(Eline's inner voice: "Enough… Enough already. This seal… is not protecting me. It is only chaining me. Kael is dead. Deer is dying. Luna is crying. Razen is standing with broken swords. Will I… still hide?")

She shattered the seal with her own hands.

A massive, pure, upper-class aura exploded from her body.

The tower shook. The stones cracked. The windows exploded. Vaelor's golden aura was suddenly repelled, neutralized, dispersed. The room filled with Eline's light. But this light was not warm. It was cold, sharp, and merciless.

Vaelor staggered a step backward. His eyes widened.
"What…?"

Eline slowly stood up. Her hair swirled in the air. Her face… was not visible. It was blurred like a dark shadow. Even her eyes were not clear. There was only her voice. Low, hoarse, and foreign:

"You… are not taking on the sin.
You are choosing the sin."

Vaelor clenched his teeth. He tried to gather his aura again but Eline's power was suppressing him.
"You who come from our lineage…
bring nothing but betrayal to our lineage!"

Eline moved.

A single step. Then a strike. Her hand was empty but the aura lashed like an invisible blade. A millimeter-precise crack opened on Vaelor's chest armor, right over the heart. The armor groaned.

Razen saw that opening.

He gripped the broken sword hilt with both hands and lunged forward. He drove the metal piece into the crack and twisted it with all his strength. The opening widened. Blood sprayed.

At that moment a shadow appeared at the entrance of the corridor.

Deer.

His shoulder shattered, his leg dragging, his face covered in blood… but standing. In his hand was a battle axe he had grabbed from the ground. With his last breath he let out a hoarse sound:

"Bonebreaker…"

He swung the axe. It sank into the open place in Vaelor's armor. The metal buried deep. At that moment Deer dropped to his knees; his consciousness faded again.

Vaelor staggered. The spear fell from his hand.

Eline bent down. She took Kael's bloody sword from the ground. Her fingers tightly gripped the hilt. Her face was still blurred in darkness. There was no expression. Only movement.

She walked to Vaelor's throat.

She raised the sword.
And thrust.

She pushed until the eyes closed.

The metal pierced the throat and reached the spine. Blood flowed from Vaelor's mouth. The golden aura completely extinguished. The giant body slowly toppled backward.

The first of the Six Great Heads… lay on the ground.

Eline did not release the sword. She stood in place, motionless. Her face was still shadowed. Like a dark statue. It was as if she were not even breathing.

Luna whispered; her voice trembled with fear:
"Eline…?"

Razen lowered the sword hilts. He said nothing. He only looked.

Then Eline's shoulders trembled slightly.

The darkness slowly dispersed. Her face became visible again. Her eyes were full. Her gaze shifted to the ground, to Kael's body.

(Eline's inner voice: "Grandmother… That night she had whispered. 'If one day you break the seal… also remember the life force. Our blood is not only for killing.' Kael… Still… warm.")

Eline slowly walked to Kael's side. She knelt. She placed her bloody hand on his chest. She closed her eyes.

The life force magic coming from her grandmother… flowed from her fingers as a thin, green, and trembling light. It seeped into the hole in the chest. The heart beat once… twice… then began to beat, weakly though it was.

Kael's fingers twitched. He spat blood with a hoarse cough. His eyes opened a crack.

Eline tried to smile but could not.

Then her body toppled forward.

She collapsed onto Kael's chest. Her consciousness completely closed.

Luna immediately ran to her side.
"Eline! Eline get up!"

Razen slowly approached. He looked at Vaelor's corpse, then at Eline. His voice was low:
"The first Great Head… has fallen."

Outside the tower, the barricade battles in the Lower City were still continuing. But in this room…
a god had died, a strategist had begun to breathe again, and a grandchild had fainted inside her own darkness.

…

The room at the top of the tower sank into a heavy silence with the complete extinguishing of the golden aura. From outside metal sounds, screams, and the creaking of barricades could still be heard, but inside these four walls time seemed to have stopped.

Razen dropped the broken sword hilts to the ground. His eyes shifted first to Vaelor's motionless body, then to Kael's weak breathing, and finally to Eline's body collapsed on top of him. Luna had dropped to her knees and was shaking Eline's shoulder.

"Eline… Eline please… open your eyes…"

Kael's fingers twitched again. He spat blood with a hoarse cough; his eyes opened a crack. His voice was almost inaudible:

"…Deer… where…?"

Razen answered briefly:

"Below. Still breathing. But severe."

Just then hurried footsteps rose from the stairs. Three healers and two assistants bearing the emblem of the Shadow Guild burst into the hall with torches. The elderly woman at their head grasped the situation at a glance.

"The wounded take priority! Do not touch the Great Head's corpse; we will look at it later. Put the red-haired one and the girl on stretchers immediately. Bring the masked one up from the lower floor as well!"

Two assistants quickly knelt beside Kael. They temporarily bandaged the hole in his chest and applied a dark green paste to stop the bleeding. While Luna lifted Eline by the arms the healer woman placed her hand on the girl's forehead.

“Aura shock… and excessive power use. Her heart is beating weakly but it is beating. Immediately to the safe zone.”

Razen emerged from the stairs with Deer on his back. His shoulder was shattered; his leg dragged but he was still alive. The healers prepared the stretchers. Within five minutes the three wounded —Kael, Eline, and Deer— were carefully carried down the narrow corridors of the tower.

Outside the barricade battles were still continuing but the special protection unit of the Shadow Guild had opened a passage on the eastern side. The stretchers were quickly directed that way. Luna tightly gripped her staff and walked beside Eline’s stretcher. Razen advanced at the very back, his eye constantly on the surroundings, still holding a broken sword hilt in his hand.

The safe zone was an old storage floor underground at the Shadow Guild. The walls were thick, the entrances hidden, the healer tents already set up. When they entered Aruze was waiting for them. Her face was pale but her voice clear:

“The wounded immediately to the treatment room. The news of Vaelor’s fall has not yet spread. The barricades are holding… for now.”

The healers set to work.

Kael’s chest wound was deep but thanks to the life magic the vessels had been reconnected. The bleeding was stopped with paste and potions; his ribs were bandaged. His eyes opened from time to time, then closed again.

Deer’s shoulder and leg were more severe. Bone fragments were removed, the wounds cleaned, strong painkillers given. They had removed his mask; the old scars on his face were even more pronounced under the new blood. His consciousness was closed but his breathing was regular.

Eline lay in a separate corner. While the healer woman placed a cold cloth on her forehead she murmured:

“She shattered the power seal with her own hands… The aura is still fluctuating. She needs to rest for a few hours. Otherwise her heart cannot take it.”

Luna sat on the edge of the stretcher. She held Eline’s hand. Her voice trembled but was determined:

“When she wakes… we will talk about everything. But first rest. We are here.”

Razen stood by the door. He had adjusted his turban again; his eyes were fixed on Eline’s face. He said nothing. He only waited.

Hours passed.

Outside the sound of the war slowly receded. Vaelor's death had created panic among the commanders; the second wave had withdrawn. The barricades were still standing. The people waited in the streets with torches.

When night fully settled the healer woman made her final checks.

"All three have passed the critical threshold. They will remain under observation until morning. For now… the day is over."

Aruze nodded.

"We are locking the guild doors. Tomorrow… we will see what happens."

Luna rested her head on the stretcher without releasing Eline's hand. Razen sat on the stool in the corner and placed the sword hilt on his knee. Deer's breathing could be heard. Kael occasionally stirred with a muffled groan.

In the underground room the torch lights were gradually allowed to dim.

A god had fallen, a strategist had begun to breathe again, a grandchild had emerged from her own darkness, and three wounded bodies had been carried to a safe place under the protection of the Shadow Guild.

The day ended with blood, smoke, and the first true victory.

Chapter 9: Victory

The first light of morning filtered through the thin curtains and filled the room.

When Kael opened his eyes, the first things he felt were a soft bed and the rhythm of two separate breaths. On his right a light scent of lavender, on his left a familiar yet still wild aura…

He fully opened his eyes.

On his right Aruze was sleeping in a plain nightgown instead of her guild uniform, her hair messy. On his left was Eline… her face still pale, her brows slightly furrowed, one arm almost stretched across his chest.

Kael froze for a second.

Then he suddenly sat up.

“What the hell is going on?!”

His voice echoed inside the room. Aruze started and opened her eyes; Eline let out a soft moan but had not fully woken yet. Kael sat on the edge of the bed, looking around. The shelves on the walls, the orderly books, the guild seals on the table…

“This is… Aruze’s house.”

He muttered to himself. The bandage on his shoulder had shifted; the wound on his chest still ached, but he had the strength to stand. He slowly left the room. There were two more doors in the corridor. He opened one a crack.

Luna and Razen were in the same bed.

Luna was curled up; her staff lay at the foot of the bed. Razen was leaning against the wall, one arm stretched over Luna's shoulder as he slept. His turban was off; his hair was messy. Kael slowly closed the door. He said nothing.

He went down the stairs.

A light smell of food came from the kitchen. Deer had set his mask aside and was stirring something in a pot on the stove. His shoulder was wrapped in thick bandages; a wooden support had been fitted to his leg, but his movements were calm. As if he had not killed a Great Head last night, as if he had not spilled his own blood.

Kael stood in the doorway.

"You're up early."

Deer answered without turning his head:

"Hunger does not like waiting. And… cooking is quieter than drawing a sword."

Kael sat at the table. He said nothing for a while. Then he asked in a low voice:

"Are we all here?"

"Yes. Aruze brought everyone to her own house last night. The lower floor of the guild was too risky. At least here the windows are locked."

Footsteps began to come from upstairs. First Luna's sleepy voice, then Razen's low murmur. A little later Aruze and Eline also came down the stairs. Eline was still pale, her hair messy, her eyes on the floor. Aruze was trying to look orderly as usual, but there was fatigue on her face.

The five people and the homeowner gathered around the large wooden table in the living room. Deer ladled the food from the pot into bowls and brought them to the center. No one ate immediately.

There was a long silence.

Kael was the first to speak. His voice was still hoarse, but clear:

"Last night… everything happened. Vaelor is dead. I almost died. Eline… you said who you are. And we are still here."

Eline lifted her head. Her eyes were full, but this time she was not running away.

“Yes. I am Elyndra Lunethra. Elyndras’s grandchild. I lied to you. I was not a village girl. I never was. But… I chose you. That night the agents came; they wanted to take me back. I refused. Because here… there was something real.”

Luna lightly struck the table with her fist. Her voice trembled:

“All this time… you walked beside me. You called me ‘sister’ and treated me like a sibling. And you… were one from above. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I was afraid,” Eline said briefly. “Of you. And of myself. The moment I broke the seal… everything changed. I brought Kael back. But the price… is this.”

Razen had retied his turban. His eyes were fixed on Eline; his voice was as distant as always:

“I felt it in the dungeon. That night. The aura came from you. I chose to stay silent. Because at that moment… surviving was more important. Now… there are questions. But first I will say one thing: If you had not broken that seal and dispersed Vaelor’s aura, we would all have died. That is a fact.”

Deer spoke while looking at his plate. He had not put on his mask. The scars on his face were clearer in the morning light:

“Those who broke my people were also from above. Your blood… is their blood. But last night you also drove the blade in. For me that is enough. At least for now.”

Aruze placed her hands on the table. The guild specialist demeanor had returned, but there was softness in her voice:

“I brought you here because the guild is now officially a target. Vaelor’s death has reached above. The Council’s reaction… may come within hours. This house is the safest place for now. But it will not last long. There is much we need to talk about: Eline’s existence, Kael’s survival, Deer’s wounds, and… what we will do from now on.”

Kael took a deep breath. His chest ached but his voice was determined:

“First let us put the truths on the table. All of us. Then we will decide. No one will judge anyone… at least this morning. Because last night, we killed a god. And we are still breathing.”

The living room sank into silence.

Everyone looked at each other.

Then the conversations began.

Long, heavy, sometimes angry, sometimes tired… but this time no one lied.

…

The conversations lasted for hours.

Toward noon the table fell silent. Everyone was tired, but somehow lighter. Aruze stood up and clapped her hands:

“There is a big celebration in the Lower City today. The guilds, the merchants, the people… have heard of Vaelor’s fall. It is not official, but everyone will pour into the streets. You will come too. At least for one night… take a breath.”

No one objected.

Toward evening everyone got ready.

The men put on the proper suits that had been found in Aruze’s house and brought from the guild. When Kael came out in a dark navy jacket, white shirt, and black trousers, Luna whistled. Razen preferred a plain black suit; he had even changed his turban to a dark fabric matching the suit. Deer, despite his bandaged shoulder, put on a dark gray jacket, put on his mask, but this time it looked cleaner.

The girls kept their own styles.

Luna arrived in a dark purple dress and a thin cloak thrown over her shoulder; she even carried her staff in an elegant case. Eline put on a simple but elegant green-toned dress that Aruze had given her. She had left her hair loose; although her face was still pale, there was a different light in her eyes. Aruze preferred a more elegant version of her guild uniform.

The central square of the Lower City was lit with torches and lanterns. Merchants had opened their stalls; musicians played drums and flutes; people laughed, shouted, clinked glasses. Slogans of “The dog of Above has fallen!” rose from time to time, then mixed with laughter.

The team mixed into the crowd.

The first hours passed cautiously. Then the drinks flowed. After two glasses Luna was already on the table, keeping rhythm with her staff. Deer was laughing in a low voice from behind his mask; a rare sight. Razen drank little but his cheeks were still slightly flushed. Kael was measured as always… until the third glass. Even Aruze had not stopped smiling.

As the night progressed the team opened up completely.

Luna leaned on Razen’s shoulder, murmuring “You’re actually not bad, turban guy.” Deer was quietly swirling his glass in a corner. Eline was at the edge of the table, drinking slowly,

smiling from time to time. Kael was watching her. The girl's green dress shone in the torchlight; her hair waved lightly in the wind.

Hours passed.

The celebration gradually began to disperse. People withdrew to their homes in groups. The music faded; the torches began to die.

The team gathered at the edge of the square.

Luna yawned and linked arms with Razen:

"I'm… a bit wobbly. Take me home."

Razen nodded. Deer had already started walking toward the guild with Aruze. Aruze turned and waved:

"The doors are open. Come whenever you want."

Kael remained beside Eline. The crowd had thinned considerably. They walked in silence for a while. Then Kael stopped.

"Eline."

The girl turned her head. There was still a slight flush of drunkenness on her face, but her eyes were clear.

Kael cleared his throat. His voice was a little distant from its usual hardness, lower:

"Tonight… would you like to talk a little on those plains?

Just… the two of us.

If you want."

Eline looked for a moment. The wind tossed her hair across her face. Then she slowly nodded.

"I would."

The two silhouettes walked away from the torch lights toward the dark plains outside the walls.

Behind them the last sounds of the celebration, in front of them things that had not yet been spoken.

…

The plains had cooled with the night.

From afar the last torch lights of the city still flickered, but here it was silent. The wind blew lightly; the grass rustled. Kael raised the collar of his jacket; Eline had crossed her arms and was walking side by side.

No one spoke for a while.

Then Kael suddenly stopped and turned to look at the girl. Instead of his usual stern expression there was a slight, mischievous curve on his face.

“You know… that ‘I’ll be like a mouse’ act of yours is still in my mind. Even last night, you were standing trembling in front of Vaelor. Then I look and you’re exploding a god.”

Eline furrowed her brows but her lips slid into a smile.

“I wasn’t trembling. I was just… cold.”

“Sure.” Kael nodded mockingly. “Your teeth were chattering from the cold. And I thought ‘wow, how brave.’”

Eline lightly hit his shoulder.

“You weren’t that much of a hero either! You couldn’t get up from the ground. You were murmuring ‘where is Deer.’”

Kael pointed to the bandage on his chest with his hand.

“At least I was standing. You fainted and collapsed on top of me. You were heavy, by the way.”

“Lie!” Eline laughed. Her voice scattered into the night. “I’m tiny.”

“Tiny, she says…” Kael rolled his eyes. Then he suddenly reached out and lightly stroked the girl’s head, ruffling her hair. “It still looks messy like those orphanage hairs. Maybe you should comb it a little?”

Eline pulled back but was laughing.

“Don’t touch! Your hands smell of sword.”

“Your hands smell of magic. We’re even.”

Both smiled. They walked a while longer. Eline occasionally dragged her foot and bumped into Kael; each time Kael teased “Watch out, you’ll fall again.” Eline stuck out her tongue; Kael replied “You must have learned that from Luna.”

They sat beside a pile of stones.

Kael leaned his back against the stone; Eline crouched beside him. While the wind tossed her hair across her face Kael reached out again and stroked lightly, this time more slowly.

“Jokes aside… I’m glad you stayed.

Otherwise I’d be sitting here alone now, whining ‘if only that mouse girl were here too.’”

Eline shrugged but her smile did not fade.

“I’m also… glad you wake up shouting ‘what the hell is going on.’ Otherwise I’d get bored in Aruze’s bed.”

Kael laughed.

“I’d like us to forget that scene but I won’t be able to. Your face was priceless.”

“Yours was worse.”

“Accepted.”

For a while only the sound of the wind was heard. Then Eline leaned slightly sideways; Kael continued stroking her head. They spoke of nothing serious. Only the old teases, the small embarrassments of last night, Luna’s drunken states, Deer cooking…

The night was advancing.

But neither of them was in a hurry.

…

Eline remained silent for a while. While the wind tossed her hair across her face again, Kael’s hand was still on her head, his fingers slowly combing through her hair. The girl suddenly lifted her head slightly and looked at Kael from the corner of her eye.

“Tell me…”

Her voice was playful but there was also a curious tone.

“Do you like Luna?”

Kael’s hand paused for a moment. Then he smiled slowly and ran his fingers through her hair again.

“You hit directly, huh.”

Eline shrugged and stuck out her tongue.

“What? I was curious. You two have been together since the cellar. She keeps praising you as the ‘planning genius,’ and you keep telling her ‘don’t shout.’ It’s a bit… strange.”

Kael leaned his head back and looked at the sky. His smile did not fade.

“Luna… is just Luna. She shouts, falls, swings her staff, then says ‘don’t forget my dessert.’ Like… I don’t know. Getting used to her is more accurate maybe. If she’s not beside me it feels incomplete. But it’s not that ‘love’ thing. More like… a ‘what did this kid do again’ feeling.”

Eline giggled.

“So like a sibling?”

“More like a mischievous nephew.” Kael lightly touched Eline’s forehead with his finger. “You’re not bad either. Both of you are headaches for me.”

Eline laughed and waved Kael’s hand away.

“At least I don’t fall off roofs!”

“Yet.”

Both laughed. Silence settled again but this time it was more comfortable. Eline pulled her knees to herself and rested her chin on them.

“All right then. I was just curious. Because… sometimes Luna looks like she really likes you. She follows you with her eyes.”

Kael shrugged slightly.

“She follows everyone. Especially when she’s hungry.”

“You follow her too.”

“I follow everyone. To survive.”

Eline looked sideways and grinned.

“You’re lying. But okay. I’ll swallow it for now.”

Kael reached out again and stroked the girl’s head, lightly ruffling her hair.

“Shut up already. You’ve gotten too smart. Or I’ll lock you in the cellar too and make you read newspapers.”

Eline stuck out her tongue but did not pull back. While the wind tossed both of their hair, only light laughter and the rustling of the grass remained on the plains.

THE END.

Chapter 10: The Times Ahead

Council Hall

Under the crystal dome the air was heavy.

Even the scent of lavender this time was mixed with metal and tension. Five seats around the hexagonal table were occupied. The sixth seat —Vaelor's seat— stood empty. His spear was not there. There was only emptiness.

Seraphinas had stood up; the solar halo rotated slowly and sharply. Her voice had lost its usual softness:

"Vaelor is dead.

A Great Head… has lost his life at the hands of those below.

This is something that has not happened for centuries."

Lunarias half-opened her eyes. Her crescent crown trembled slightly:

"And the grandchild… Elyndra Lunethra.

She shattered her seal with her own hands. She dispersed Vaelor's aura. She delivered the final blow.

One of our own blood fought against us."

The eye at the tip of Morrigan's staff was fully open. The voice from under her veil was icy:

"Betrayal.

Clear and definite.

That child is no longer only a risk. An enemy.

The execution order should have been given long ago. We delayed."

Elyndras was looking at the table. Her green hair had fallen over her shoulders; her fingers gripped the edge of the seat so tightly that her nails had whitened. Her voice came out hoarse:

"She… is my grandchild.

My blood."

Seraphinas turned to her. The solar halo flashed for a moment:

“Blood ties are secondary to the survival of the system.

You know this as well, Elyndras.

Last night you remained silent at that table. Today you will remain silent as well.”

Caelion spoke at length for the first time. As his star halo slowly rotated, his gaze had drifted to the empty seat:

“Vaelor’s death… has created a weakness.

Those below have now seen that ‘gods can be killed.’

The red-haired one is still alive. The masked one, the turbaned one, the mage girl… all are standing.

And among them is a grandchild of a Great Head.

This can turn the rebellion into a legend.”

Morrigan lightly struck her staff on the ground:

“Then we uproot the legend.

Not the entire Lower City… but the center of the rebellion.

The Shadow Guild, that red-haired one, the grandchild… all of them.

In one night.”

Lunarias nodded:

“Haste is dangerous.

Vaelor’s army is scattered. The antidote has spread. The people are emboldened.

A hard blow could start a greater fire.”

Seraphinas leaned on the table with both hands. Her voice filled the hall:

“Three decisions.

One: The execution of Elyndra Lunethra is finalized.

The moment she is captured… execution.

Two: Kael Ezren Ashborne and his team are declared priority targets.

Alive or dead.

Three: Vaelor’s empty seat… will remain empty for now.

The selection of a new Great Head is postponed until the rebellion is suppressed.”

Elyndras lifted her head. Her eyes were red but her voice did not tremble:

“Will you kill my grandchild… with your own hands?”

Morrigan looked from under her veil:

“No.

With the hands of those below.

It will be cleaner.”

The hall sank into silence again.

The light filtering from the crystal dome left a long shadow over the empty seat.

As the Council dissolved, Elyndras remained last.

Her fingers were still gripping the seat.

Her lips moved but no sound came out.

Only a single word passed through her:

Eline…

CHARACTER LIST

MAIN CHARACTERS

Kael (Kael Ezren Ashborne)
Red-haired strategist. Member of the Shadow Guild. The mind and leader of the rebellion. Of the Ashborne lineage.

Luna (Lunais Silvera)
Young mage. Thrown out of the orphanage. Uses a broken staff. The energy and mischievous member of the group.

Deer
Twin sword master with a deer skull mask. Survivor of the Bonebreakers massacre. Silent and furious.

Razen Takayukinobu
Eastern sword master. Bare upper body, turbaned. Extremely high techniques. Joins the group later.

Eline (Elyndra Lunethra)
Grandchild of Elyndras. Sealed Upper Class member.

Aruze Avelin
Shadow Guild Human Resources and Mission Assignment Specialist. The woman who keeps the team’s files, supports them but remains cautious.

THE ONES ABOVE (Great Heads)

Vaelor
Great Head with red cloak and spear. The warrior who descended to the Lower City.

Seraphinas
Bearer of the solar halo. De facto leader of the Council. Authoritative and calculating.

Lunarias
Bearer of the crescent crown. The more cautious and balanced-speaking Great Head.

Elyndras
Green-haired. Eline's grandmother. Experiences an inner collapse in the face of her grandchild's betrayal.

Morrigan
Veiled, with an eye at the tip of her staff. Merciless and pro-execution.

Caelion
Bearer of the star halo. Calm, mocking, and composed.

SIDE CHARACTERS

Guild Master (Bearded Man)
Middle-aged, bearded man behind the counter of the Shadow Guild. Assigns missions, distributes rewards.

Innkeeper's Daughter
The servant at the inn Kael and Luna go to.

Blacksmith
Burly man who sells armor and protection.

Apothecary Woman
Old woman who sells potions and smoke bombs. The one who says "Even those in the sky aren't looking this way anymore."

Baker
Old man from whom Kael buys a pastry for Luna.

Laundry Woman
Woman who gives the first clue about the Red Plague. Tells of her nephew falling ill.

Smuggler
Old smuggler who tells Deer the location of the western dungeons.

Elite Guard

Massive, metal-caged, mace-wielding guard from Vaelor’s special unit. Killed in the dungeon.

Upper Class Agents
Three agents who come to take Eline back. Try to persuade her by calling them “savages.”

Guild Healers
Elderly healer woman and her assistants who treat the wounded in the tower.

Shadow Guild Protection Unit
Guild soldiers who take part in the barricade battles and the evacuation of the wounded.

TOURNAMENT FIGHTERS

Vorak
Orc axe master from the Iron Fist Guild. Forces Luna to forfeit; matches against Deer in the semifinals.

Zephyra
Assassin from the Northern Clans. Eliminated in the first round against Vorak.

Balthazar
Heavy-armored knight from the Crimson Swords Guild. Defeated by Deer without him drawing his swords.

Jax
Chain-knife master from the Shadow Guild. Matches against Kael in the quarterfinals.

Thorne
Former Palace Guard, spear master. Defeated by Jax.

Garrok
Wild Lands hunter, mace-wielder. Eliminated in the first round against Luna.

Malakor
Dark Order knight, uses poisoned knives. Defeated by Kael.

Igneous
Fire Kingdom adventurer, flaming sword master. Defeated by Razen.

Drakon
Sledgehammer master from Dark Refuge. Matches against Deer in the quarterfinals.

Vaelen
Archer and dagger specialist from the Silver Wing Clan. Defeated by Drakon.

Sarah
Assassin from the Shadow Guild. Defeated by Razen.

Kaelen
Dual scimitar master from the Desert Nomads. Defeated by Sarah.

OTHERS MENTIONED

Kael’s Father
Died of Spotted Fever.

Kael’s Mother
Disappeared in an Upper Class mansion. Never returned.

Luna’s Orphanage Nuns
Those who threw Luna out calling her “cursed.”

Deer’s People
Community living in mountain caves, massacred by the Bonebreakers.

Eline’s Mother and Father
People referred to by the agents as “worried” and “impatient.”

Gang Leaders (Old and Young)
Two leaders who confess in front of the people after the list leak.

Market Women
Women who read the copies of the list and cry upon seeing their grandchildren’s names.

Guards and Commanders
Various armored guards and commanders from Vaelor’s army (especially the bone-symbol commander who is Deer’s old enemy).

Monk
White-haired, slightly hunched but with clear and sharp eyes. Monk with a staff in his hand.

Monk’s Student
Young student. Simply dressed, wooden bo staff in his hand. Calm face, balanced stance.